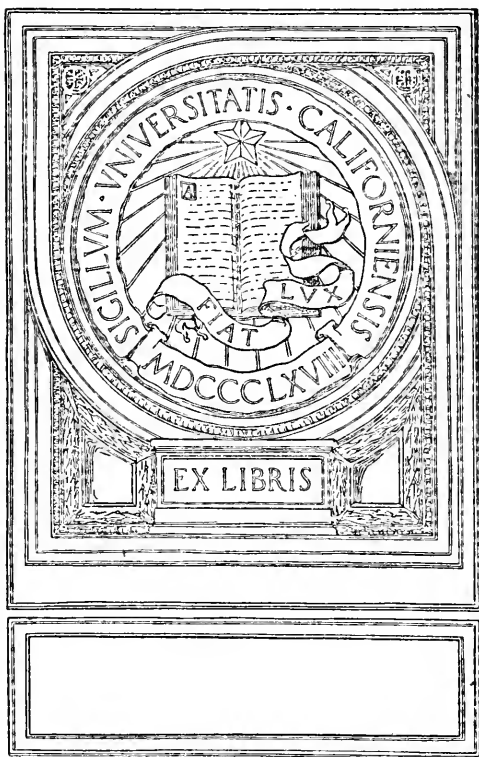




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# THE BROOKES

OF

# BRIDLEMERIE.

BY

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AUTHOR OF "THE GLADIATORS," "DEBY GRANT," "THE INTERPRETER," "HOLMEY  
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# THE BROOKES OF BRIDLEMERE.

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## CHAPTER I.

### TWILIGHT.

**I**T'S hard lines, Mas'r Philip—hard lines !  
That's where it is, for a chap as is able  
and willin', and can't get work for five  
weeks now come Toosday. The jobs  
is scarce, ye see ; with the days shortening, and  
winter coming on, and what-not ; but I dun-know  
how to better it, bless ye, not I, cut it which  
way you will."

Jem Batters having thus relieved his mind in the vernacular, turned to his companion a face of injured honesty and simplicity, scarcely in keeping with the general character of his appearance. A much-worn velveteen jacket, loose cord breeches, sturdy calves, and heavy ankle-boots, seemed the

natural appendages of a countryman who was supposed to be as arrant a poacher as ever set a night-line in a reservoir, or a snare in a *smeuse*. Nor did Jem's countenance in any way redeem the rest of his person from the imputations under which it laboured. The features were good, but pale, though weatherbeaten; and the eyes, small and cunning, looked bold, without being frank. A red handkerchief, knotted loosely round his neck, denoted pursuits somewhat without the pale of honest labour, though as yet on the safe side of the county gaol. Altogether he seemed a slang, knowing, able-bodied, unscrupulous sort of person—such an one as a man had rather breakfast with than fight, nor care indeed to share his morning repast, unless there was enough prepared for three.

But “Mas'r Phil,” properly called Mr. Philip Stoney, did not form his opinion from externals, and indeed was accustomed to look deeper below the surface than most people. On the present occasion he took notice of the blood from a dead rabbit oozing through the pocket of Jem Batters's velveteen, and scrupled not to express his sentiments on the subject.

“You’ll do no good without being strictly honest, Jem. I’ve told you so many a time. You’ve no more right to that rabbit in your pocket than you have to take the gun out of my hand, and spout it at the first pawnbroker’s shop you come to in the High Street of Middlesworth. You were paid to beat ; and if you’ve done your day’s work, you’ve got your day’s wages. What business have *you* with the Squire’s property, if it was only the worth of a halfpenny ?”

“The Squire’ll never miss it,” replied Jem, with a sheepish expression of countenance, and a forced smile that did not improve his beauty. He looked askance at Philip Stoney while he spoke, like a dog who knows he has done wrong, and deprecates the anger of his master. The latter answered, in a sterner tone—

“The Squire wouldn’t miss it, if you took five shillings off his chimney-piece ; but the law would send you to prison and hard labour, all the same ; and serve you right ! Poaching is but stealing out of doors, Jem. You ought to know that as well as I do. I tell you, I wouldn’t trust a poacher any more than I would a housebreaker or a thief.”

But Jem could not see the matter exactly in this light. It is doubtful if he ever admitted to himself he was committing a crime when he picked up a hare for supper on "a shiny night," though he had a vague idea that it was not quite a 'respectable action; and indeed, if he knew his own interest, was better let alone.

"It's hard, too, Mas'r Philip," said he, plucking a dry twig from the adjoining hedge, and munching it with apparent relish. "But you've been a good friend to me, and mother too, however; and I take notice of what you says more nor I do of parson, nor Squire neither. You couldn't give a poor chap a job, could you, Mas'r Phil?" added Jem, in his most insinuating tones, and without removing the twig from his mouth.

"I'll tell you what it is, Jem," replied the other, putting his hand at the same time into his pocket, "I've known you a long time, and I'll see if I can give you one more chance yet. Look ye here. You take that rabbit back to old Half-cock, the keeper. Promise now, and come down to our place the first thing to-morrow morning. I'll speak to my brother to-night about you. But it's your last chance, Jem—mind that. We don't



keep dogs that won't bark in our shop ; and if a man isn't honest, and sober too, he'd better not come at all, for we shall be sure to find him out, and turn him adrift, without thinking twice about it. Good-night, Jem. Take the rabbit back before you go home, and don't be late to-morrow, for it's market-day, and we shall be pretty busy before twelve o'clock."

So the two parted on their respective paths, Philip Stoney stepping briskly out on his homeward way, and Jem Batters compromising the matter of the rabbit by laying it down in the corner of a copse where it was pretty sure to be found by the keeper when he came round with a retriever to pick up lost game next morning.

There had been a *battue* at Bridlemere that day—not one of your pounding, slaughtering, cannonading attacks, resembling a general action in all but the small proportion of those who run away ; when, to enjoy the sport—if such it can be called—dandies come down from London, with all the modern improvements in dress, arms, and accoutrements, for the express purpose of learning how often they can pull their triggers within a given number of hours. If they shoot straight,

and obtain an enormous bag, so much the better ; but the great thing is to let the gun off at the utmost possible rate of rapidity and repetition. When the colonel is sent forward with one breech-loader in his hand, and two more carried by his attendants (six barrels in all), so that he can never be for an instant unprepared ; when my lord, with his legs very wide apart, stands like a colossus in the ride, and while

“Slides the bird o’er lustrous woodland,”

misses *rocketer* after *rocketer*, with increasing impatience and disgust ; when gentlemen’s gentlemen, sighing for the warmth of the castle, and the luxuries of “the room,” load for their masters with a gracious carelessness, not always quite safe for the sportsman, but assumed by the valet as if he were performing the mere every-day duties of the toilet ; when the duke, at close of day, apologizes to his guests for the badness of the sport, and condoles with them that they have only averaged some two hundred head per gun ! No ; the *battue* at Bridlemere was nothing of this sort, but a cozy little affair of eighty cock-pheasants, and twice that number of hares and rabbits

equally enough distributed amongst half a dozen people, who shot well and fairly, without more jealousy than was desirable in order that each man should do his best. There was a pretty range of copsewood, skirting a warm and sheltered dingle, to shoot in the forenoon; a capital luncheon, with strong home-brewed, at two o'clock; and a good deal of sport afterwards in the fox-covert, which afforded, in addition to a woodcock, the cheering sight of a brace of the wild and wily animals, to the preservation of which it was specially devoted. Old Halfcock never trapped a fox in his life, though, with the perverse instinct of a gamekeeper, he would have been only too glad of the chance, for well he knew that such an offence against the Squire's standing orders would be his first and last. So Bridlemere offered a sure find nearly once a fortnight in open weather; and though the Squire was wont to complain with sufficient pride that the Duke was *very hard upon it*, two or three of the best runs in the season owed their celebrity to that time-honoured locality. Game and foxes are a contradiction that has long since ceased to be an impossibility; and there was, without doubt, a fair show of both at Bridlemere.

Philip Stoney, walking home to Middlesworth, reflected pleasantly enough on his day's amusement, and the skill he had displayed both in and out of covert, at flesh and fowl, fur and feather, ground game and winged. Phil was an Englishman all over—a pure-bred Anglo-Saxon as ever stopped a cricket-ball in flannels, or handled a Purdey in velvet. He was no admirable Crichton, like the hero of a novel, who must needs be strong as Hercules, beautiful as Apollo, brave and swift as the son of Peleus, alternately sulking in his tent, and vapouring over his comrades on the narrow strip of sand where the god-like heroes of the “Iliad” laid their ten-years’ leaguer round the walls of Troy. No; he was but a fair representative of the thousands of Englishmen who constitute the upper and middle classes of our happy country. For his bodily gifts, he could walk, run, leap, skate, and swim as well as his neighbours, though truth compels me to admit that he knew not a note of music, and was an execrable dancer. He could stand up fairly enough to professional bowling, when the ground was smooth; shoot straight, either in the coppice or on the stubble, when not too much

hurried ; and would ride a good horse, in a good place, with a pack of fox-hounds, even at the expense of an occasional fall. His mental qualities and acquirements were rather sound than brilliant. Latin and Greek he had learned, and forgotten. Of history, both ancient and modern, he was not more ignorant than other people. Science he might have dabbled in, could he have spared the time. He had a clear head for business, was a capital accountant, and spoke French, the only continental language he attempted, as Talleyrand said the Great Duke did, "bravely." For his tastes, he so far agreed with Byron, that

"He loved our taxes, when they're not too many ;  
He loved a sea-coal fire, when not too dear ;  
He loved a beef-steak too, as well as any ;  
Had no objection to a pot of beer."

Was a little inclined to Liberalism in politics, and intolerance in religion ; believed *The Times*, shaved scrupulously, drank port wine, and hated a lie.

Without being handsome, he had a clear, fresh complexion, and a small well-shaped head, on which the brown locks were cropped short and close. His teeth were good, and he showed them

all when he spoke. His eyes light, but looking straight into your own, with a frank and fearless expression that inspired confidence in his sincerity at once. All this, carried by a square, able-bodied figure, very quick and energetic in its gestures, offered an exterior rather pleasing than otherwise; and as well-known in the streets of Middlesworth as the late-erected drinking-fountain or the old church clock.

He stepped along more briskly, as evening began to close, and the town lights twinkled out more and more numerous through the hazy twilight, yet lingering round some dull crimson streaks on the horizon left by the departed sun. It was a soft, still November evening, such as is never experienced out of England, and shows our English climate and our English scenery to the greatest advantage. Everywhere else in Europe a fine winter's day means a dazzling sun and a piercing cold, that if you only took your wraps off, would finish you in about ten minutes; but in our own little island, which we abuse so heartily amongst ourselves, it means a green and grateful earth; a sky of dappled clouds, serene and motionless, edged here and there with gold; a sleeping

fragrance and vitality only waiting for the spring ; and a mild, hazy atmosphere, through which trees, and hills, and hedges loom out, grave and ghostly, and indistinct. Philip felt in charity with all mankind, and more than usually grateful to Providence for the many advantages of his position, the many pleasures of health and strength, and everyday life—nay, for the harmless amusement and enjoyment of the hours he had just spent at Bridlemere. Behind him was the recollection of a delightful day's shooting, in which he had borne a skilful and satisfactory part ; the pleasant interchange of good fellowship with those of his own age, nowhere so frankly afforded as in manly out-of-doors recreation, and which furnishes one of the strongest rational arguments in favour of field-sports ; a conviction that he was esteemed, certainly not for his station, or such fictitious advantages, but for himself ; and a pleasant consciousness that he was not an idle man, like most of those with whom he had spent the day, but a working bee, for whom business was business, and pleasure, pleasure—an arrangement which enhances extremely the satisfaction of both, and which the drones, who eat the honey without the

labour of making it, never can be brought to understand.

Around him were already stretching the level town meadows, grass at three pounds an acre, smooth and springy as a garden lawn, feeding huge beeves, that scarcely moved in their early beds by the foot-path, save to raise great handsome wide-horned heads, and stare lazily at him as he passed—a movement, nevertheless, sufficiently terrifying to the only other passenger across the town-lands, a little girl pattering home to “mother” from a half-mile errand, who kept close behind Philip, for convoy through this alarming region.

Presently he sees the white indistinct lines of the drying grounds in the suburbs, and “mother” herself, with soapy arms, and pinned-up skirts, taking in fluttering garments from the clothes-line; and now immediately before him, so to speak, is the anticipation of warmth, and fire-light, and dinner, and rest, in his own comfortable home on the other side of the town. He is a Middlesworth man, and is proud of it, firmly believing that for health, beauty, convenience, public buildings, and private society, everything but “business”—of which he could wish it afforded a little more—his



town would bear comparison with any city on the face of the earth.

Everybody might not, perhaps, agree with Philip Stoney in this favourable estimate. Mr. Dowlas, the draper, who set up here when he retired from London, having failed there twice, once in Wigmore Street, and once in the Tottenham Court Road, considers it "a poor place altogether, sir; a place in which a young man finds no opening; a place quite behind the times;" and a smart, black-bearded Italian, generally regarded by the inhabitants as a conspirator, with horrible designs against the French Emperor, to be prosecuted in some mysterious manner, from a confectioner's shop in the market-place, left it after a month's trial, in a fit of somewhat unreasonable disgust, because there was no opera. Nevertheless, the population in general are extremely patriotic, and however much they may squabble amongst themselves, rise like one man to vindicate the honour and glory, and general respectability of their town.

As Middlesworth, however, may not be quite so well known to the general public as to its own inhabitants, and the nobility and gentry of the shire, who frequent its shops on market-day, and

fill its judicial buildings at Quarter Sessions, Assizes, and such other important gatherings of landed proprietors—as, moreover, the simple story I have to tell is chiefly connected with this locality and its immediate neighbourhood, I may be permitted to pause on the very threshold of my narrative, for the purpose of affording the reader some vague idea of the general features and character of the place.

To a certain extent, and from a metropolitan point of view, particularly as regards facilities for borrowing money, discounting bills, and robbing the British public, Mr. Dowlas is right. Middlesworth is far “behind the times,” when compared with London, Liverpool, Manchester, and such large, populous, and speculative cities; but money, nevertheless, is to be made in its quiet streets, by honest enterprise; and many an active, industrious tradesman has realized a comfortable competence in its marts, and retired in the prime of life to enjoy the fruits of his success in its suburbs. These outskirts are consequently well supplied with the peculiar style of house which, when isolated by twenty feet or so from its neighbours, is dignified by the title of “a villa,” but of which half-a-dozen

constitute "a terrace," and twice that number "a place." Plate-glass and laburnums are the specialities of these residences; and save for the consideration that all the rooms are in front, and commanded from the public road, they would seem to be commodious and comfortable dwellings enough.

But if the suburbs of Middlesworth thus run to retirement and gentility, the streets and lanes, and rows, within the actual precincts of the town, affect no such attempts at refinement or ostentation. They have no pretension to sink the trade by which they thrive. Bow-windowed shops, especially for the sale of butchers'-meat, protrude themselves boldly on the pavement, which is, however, in many places wide enough to admit of two male passengers walking abreast. Stalls, whereon are exposed most commodities of daily life, form an outwork to this footway, projecting far into the street. Any intervals that might otherwise be left unguarded, are filled with hand-barrows, empty casks, and articles of ornamental husbandry, such as iron-work, ploughs, many-teethed harrows, or patent dibbling machines, so that the width of the thoroughfare may be contracted to the scantiest

limits. A cattle-market, too, is held weekly in the narrowest of the streets, and as the town is paved throughout with the smoothest and most slippery of stones, it may be imagined that a ride or drive through Middlesworth, on any special occasion, is a progress not entirely devoid of that excitement which springs from a sense of personal fear.

The shops, however, are cheap and good of their kind. The staple manufacture of the town being muffatees, it is needless to observe that these are not to be procured for love or money, of decent quality, owing, perhaps, to the brisk export trade driven with the South Sea Islanders for this indispensable article of costume; but all other necessities, and most luxuries of life, are found in Middlesworth, of as good quality as in London, and at little more than cost price.

Two branch railways connect this flourishing town with two great arteries of English traffic, rendering its communications with other places as facile as is compatible with the inconvenience of its local arrangements, trains being scarce during the day, but redundant before light in the morning and after dark at night. It has, besides, a race-

course, a corn exchange, a homœopathic dispensary, a hospital, three churches, of which the oldest is, of course, the handsomest, and a nondescript building for the administration of justice, presenting a happy combination of several distinct orders of architecture, including the Chinese, with twisted pillars, parti-coloured porches, and an Oriental roof, the whole wrought out in brickwork and stucco, the colour of strawberries and cream.

There are days of bustle and confusion at Middlesworth, but there are also days of peace and somnolent quiet, verging on stagnation. Once a year, when Tattersall's pours its subscribers into the grand stand on its race-course, for the great Middlesworth Handicap; once a week, when the adjacent villages send their rustic inhabitants to market in its overflowing streets, and their carriers' carts, to increase the profits of its public-houses and beer-shops, a stranger would imagine that he had arrived at the very emporium of speculation and commerce; but let him stay over the night at the Plantagenet Arms, or elsewhere, and sally forth after his coffee-room breakfast next day. Lo! the spell is broken; the hive, lately so busy and populous, is hushed and lonely now; the shops are

empty, the streets deserted ; save the church clock lazily chiming the quarters, not a sound disturbs the drowsy air, and Middlesworth seems to stand solemn, silent, and untenanted, as Palmyra, the City of the Dead.

Philip Stoney had lived in the town all his life, had been to a day-school in its High Street, and played in its cricket matches (Middlesworth against Mudbury), ever since he was old enough to wield a bat or stop a ball. Except for a couple of years spent in London, to give him an insight into business, and a few months at Manchester with a flourishing cousin, who proposed to put the extra polish of a commercial education on him in his counting-house, and certainly did take him to half-a-dozen balls and dinner-parties every week, he had never quitted his own home for more than a few days at a time. No wonder he looked affectionately on every nook and corner of the quaint old place ; no wonder he felt interested in the Mayor's improvements, and the Town Council's edicts, and all the petty details of the circle in which he lived, including the little squabbles and heart-burnings of the municipality, a body no less distinguished for diversity of opinion, than for the

frequency and excellence of the dinners at which it was their official privilege to meet.

Many a time had Philip watched the lights of Middlesworth as he neared them at even-tide, and felt he was really going *home*. After a jaunt for business or pleasure into the adjoining counties; after a day with the Duke's hounds, on a certain blemished old chestnut horse, by which he set great store, and justly, inasmuch as his grace's own stable could not produce a better hunter, and the animal, notwithstanding its lean old head, and a pair of very worn looking fore-legs, afforded Philip many a delightful gallop in a recreation both of them enjoyed above all others. After a few hours' good shooting as to-day in winter, or after a pic-nic in summer, with a bevy of Middlesworth young ladies, damsels of fascinating manners, though somewhat *gushing*, and rejoicing in sumptuous apparel, such as dazzles, while it subdues; but the advantage of whose society, I fear, Philip did hardly appreciate, being indeed less susceptible to the florid order of beauty, than to the chaste, and classical, and severe. After any and all of these excursions, I repeat, it was his nature to return to Middlesworth as the bird returns to its nest; nay,

with even a more eager alacrity, for the bird, we know, goes out to feed, whereas the unfeathered biped comes home for that important ceremony. To be young, to be hungry, to be able to walk five miles an hour, heel and toe, these are advantages of which men are scarcely conscious, yet of which they make good use while they possess them. It was Philip's habit to hurry home as if he were very hungry indeed, which perhaps was generally the case.

To-night, however, his pace was variable and ill-sustained. Sometimes he strode on rapidly, at a rate that forced his little follower to break into a short jerking trot; sometimes he relapsed moodily into a thoughtful crawl, denoting the absorbing influence of profound reflection, and once he halted so suddenly, that his unprepared convoy ran fairly between his legs. But Philip was undisturbed by this, as by every other external influence of the moment. Habitual day-dreamers, like habitual drunkards, preserve at their worst an inner consciousness that enables them to shake off, with a temporary effort, the effects of their favourite indulgence; but a practical, wide-awake intellect, steeped in a fit of abstraction, like a sober man



who has chanced for once to get drunk, loses all power of observation, and abandons all attempt at self-consciousness or self-control. The child's excuse of "Please, sir, mother said as I must be home afore dark," was quite lost upon him, though repeated more than once, nor did he miss the little footsteps when they pattered joyfully away in front at the welcome sight of "mother" in the drying-ground. His thoughts must have been very far from Middlesworth and its outskirts, to judge from his pre-occupation. His manner was not that of a man who is thinking of his dinner, the subject to which human reflection naturally points about this hour of the day, and when he reached the bridge that spans a sluggish river meandering round the outskirts of the town, he seemed to have abandoned all idea of that necessary refreshment, for he stood still when half-way across, and looked dreamily over the parapet into the quiet stream.

It was nearly dark now. A star or two struggled faintly through the thin misty clouds that were stealing over the heavens from the south. The light breeze, though damp, was soft and pleasant to his cheek, fanning him with quiet breath

ere it passed on to stir the rustling sedges by the river-side, and mingle their murmurs with the drowsy lap of the water against its low, level banks.

The town was close at hand, with its hum of voices and continuous tread of men; but Philip seemed no more aware of its vicinity than if he had been in the middle of the Great Desert. The river was beneath his feet, stealing on to the sea slowly, insensibly, surely, as time steals on to eternity; but he thought not of the river nor the sea, nor indeed, in the common acceptance of the words, of time nor of eternity neither.

Dim though they were, the two or three stars visible seemed to have more attraction for him than any other material objects, and he indulged in a good long stare at these celestial bodies, apparently deriving a certain relief and gratification from the process. It was a strange occupation for a man of Mr. Stoney's character and habits; so near dinner-time, too, and after a day's shooting at Bridlemere.

Mankind, I believe, after all, are very much alike. We differ, it is true, in our external ap-

pearance, our faces, figures, complexions, manners, and various styles of ugliness; but I make little doubt that the formation of each one's heart, liver, and digestive process is upon the same pattern, and indeed almost identical. On a like principle, the springs that set the outer man in motion, the feelings, affections, weaknesses, and prejudices of one specimen are common to all humanity. Were it not so, where would be the advantage of studying human nature, of acquiring that knowledge which, like the science of medicine, is based on the assumption that all interiors are alike? You look at an old gentleman dozing over his wine by the fire-side, bald, portly, and double-chinned, infirm upon his pins, and spread into a goodly bulk below the girdle. It is hard to believe that this is the same man who led the forlorn hope at Mullagatawny, and won the lightweight steeple-chase at Ballinasloe, besides taking all hearts captive in Dublin by the agility of his dancing and the symmetry of his figure, the year the potatoes were so plentiful, and the Viceroy's balls so well attended. Or you watch a venerable dame, with a Mother Shipton nose and chin, a shrill, shaking voice, false teeth, false hair, and a

complexion of brickdust and whitewash, wondering the while how this can be the lady who refused dukes and marquises, and made a runaway match for love with a clerk in the Foreign Office, temporarily breaking the heart of the old gentlemen aforesaid in that ill-advised performance. Perhaps you speculate on the possibility of renewing the flash in the man's spirit, or the capability for indiscretion in the woman's heart: perhaps you arrive at the conclusion that neither ever *really* grow old, that the sacred fire is never thoroughly quenched in the immortal subject, but, though damped and smothered for the present, will assuredly flicker up again at some future period, bright and consuming as of yore.

Old and young, men and women, wise and simple, rich and poor, for each and all there is a combustible principle somewhere beneath the clay—a wild drop in the blood, a crevice in the plate armour, a soft spot in the heart.

Philip Stoney was of the same material as his fellow-creatures, and perhaps, on emergency, not a bit wiser or stronger than the rest. Nevertheless, he made no long stay upon the bridge, but

after a good stare at the stars, sighed gently, and walked on with rapid step and head erect, like a man who, looking far into the future, has made up his mind to follow out what he sees there, resolutely and without fear.



## CHAPTER II.

### COUNTRY QUARTERS.

**N**OTWITHSTANDING its many weaknesses and shortcomings, its unworthy subterfuges under pressure, and obvious want of confidence on the eve of a division, even the Opposition papers could not but admit that Government showed sound discretion in stationing a squadron of light dragoons at Middlesworth. The presence of the detachment shed its exhilarating influence over every nook and corner of the town. Public-houses in by-streets, albeit never languishing for want of business, found trade so briskly on the increase as to admit of their providing customers gratis with glees, fiddles, and other musical provocatives of thirst. Small shopkeepers, deriving

no practical benefit from the presence of the military, but rejoicing in that sense of bustle which the mercantile mind connects vaguely with an idea of profit, were glad to treat the men of the sword to much serious drinking free of expense. It was the beer these heroes swallowed, not what they paid for, that stimulated consumption so vigorously during the dark hours intervening between evening stables and watch-setting. The principal hotel, too, furnished the officers' mess with wines at the highest possible price, and sundry lodging-house keepers derived their own share of profit from such enterprising ladies as did not disdain to accompany their husbands into country quarters. All classes received the cavalry with open arms. Even the farrier-major, notoriously the ugliest man in the regiment, and the thirstiest, confessed that he had more liquor given him than he could drink, and, although an Irishman, more offers of marriage than he could find it in his conscience to entertain. The muffatee makers, as may be supposed, were not the least ardent admirers of their military guests. The male portion seemed too happy to welcome any additional incentive to the con-

sumption of excisable fluids, and the female stitchers, closers, and other handicrafts-women of the trade felt secure of a suitor apiece, spurred, braided, and small-waisted, of easy manners, chronic thirst, and tolerable constancy until ordered elsewhere.

A walk through Middlesworth after sunset afforded accordingly an amusing and enlivening sight. The muffatee makers having finished stitching for the day, turned out in streams, gay with their best attire, in abundant crinolines, saucy hats, and hair, though not very well brushed, dressed in the newest fashion. I must allow they were little remarkable for beauty as a class—even the farrier-major was obliged to admit that—but, then, as he observed, “*They was so haffable!*” Their military swains ’squired them about the doors of the different public-houses, while their civilian adorers were drinking steadily within—the latter thus consoling themselves under unavoidable defeat; for how could they hold their own against such odds as clanking spurs, laced jackets, forage caps (without peaks) balanced on one ear, waxed moustaches, and, above all, that fascinating walk, half stride, half



swagger, combining the utmost rigidity of body, with apparent paralysis of the lower limbs, which is specially affected by every dismounted dragoon?

Private Overall, of C Troop, Loyal Dancing Hussars, lounging in the ill-lighted street, under the sign of the "Fox and Fiddle," and listening to some one playing an accordion within, seemed the only individual in uniform unprovided with a companion of the other sex. Overall was a smart fellow, too, a favourite with his captain, rather an authority amongst his comrades, very often seen smoking a cigar, and, when he took off his pipe-clayed glove, further adorned with a ring.

That Miss Blades, the butcher's daughter, was secretly over head and ears in love with Overall, and shutting her eyes to the humiliating consideration that she was thus "letting herself down," would steal out presently for a five minutes' interview at the corner of the street, under pretence of "fetching father's beer," is a shred of gossip unconnected with my tale, and on which I am not obliged to dwell; but, in the meantime, Overall was switching the unoffending air with a smart riding-whip, and debating in his own mind whether he would not go in for "just

another half-pint," not without a strong inclination to carry that measure in the affirmative. Presently he espied a comrade coming up the street in the attire soldiers call "coloured clothes"—an expression they apply indiscriminately to all civil garments, even a suit of black, in contradistinction to the scarlet or blue of their own uniforms. On the present occasion the "coloured clothes" were of a good working fustian, denoting that the wearer was a *bâtman*, or officer's servant, though on the strength of the regiment as a trooper in its ranks. He carried a pair of very workmanlike top-boots in his hand, and was obviously hastening back to barracks. He *must* have been in a hurry, for he declined his friend's invitation to drink.

"Do as I do, Tommy?" asked Overall, hospitably, with a jerk of his smart head towards the 'Fox and Fiddle.' "Take a drain, man: it'll do ye good!"

"Throat's as dry as a limekiln!" answered "Tommy," whose surname was Belter, passing the back of his large hand across his moustaches. "Can't be done though, Bill. Time's up, d'ye see?"

"Just a suck, and run home again," pleaded

Overall, spinning a sixpence in the air, and catching it dexterously as it fell. "Wants twenty minutes to stables yet."

But Belter was proof against his comrade's solicitations, and passed on, shaking his head gravely as one who fulfils a duty at great personal sacrifice. Let us follow him through the windings of two or three dark and slippery streets, which he threaded as though well acquainted with their intricacies, and in the gloomiest of which a heavy figure lurched helplessly against him, and subsided with a drunken laugh into a sitting posture on the pavement.

"Hurrah!" hiccupped Jem Batters—for Jem, I am sorry to say, it was. "It's my call now. Mr. Batters will favour the company with a song. Hurrah!"

Belter spread a cotton handkerchief carefully on the driest square of pavement, stood the top-boots thereon with extreme deliberation, and then raised the sitter slowly to his legs, propping him against a friendly lamp-post, and urging him to "hold on by his eyelids till his missis could nip round the corner, and fetch him home."

Jem Batters, however, seemed to treat all such

domestic interference with utter contempt. Persuaded that he was presiding over a convivial meeting with equal grace and ability, he continued to pour out a doleful lament, bewailing himself in the reflection that

“ ——— if he had had good government,  
He had not come to this ——— ”

and impressing on his hearer, with touching gravity (while he clung to the lamp-post), a moral contained in the following stanza, which, though it seemed to have no connection with the rest of his ditty, he repeated over and over again :—

“ But I was always ready  
To run at every one's call ;  
Though it grieves my mind, yet still, I find  
Good government is all.”

Then he shook his head, got gradually lower and lower down the lamp-post, and subsided once more into his former sitting posture on the flag-stones.

The fact is, Jem was helplessly drunk. Several causes had combined since sundown to produce this disgraceful, and I am bound to say, by no means unusual, result.

In the first place, Jem was desirous of meeting

a friend in Philip Stoney's employment, to impart the good news that he hoped to enter the same service on the morrow. A narrow, crowded street is an uncomfortable locality for conversation. The friend was a married man; but it was "washing-day" at home. Independent of the confusion, damp, and other disagreeables attending such an operation in the scanty lodging tenanted by a working man, he was too well drilled by his "missis" to think of bringing in a visitor at such a time. Where could the two go but into the well-warmed, well-lighted, and well-decorated tap of the familiar "Fox and Fiddle"? There they had cleanliness, comfort, and shelter, the excitement of society, and the charms of music, for the accordion was in practised and untiring hands. There they were free to talk, and laugh and jest, and gossip with their own class, discussing their news of the day, the rate of wages, and the price of bread—just as interesting to them as the odds on the Derby, or the defeat of Ministers, to my lord at Brookes's and White's. But being there, they must call for a pint. Men always begin with a pint, and soon that which promised to be but a cheerful and friendly meet-

ing grew to a quarrelsome and degrading debauch. Jem Batters had only one shilling in his pocket—the shilling Philip gave him in the afternoon; but a man with a tendency to inebriety can get very drunk for that sum if he likes. The soldiers, too, shared the beer to which they were treated very freely with Jem. He was an able-bodied, likely looking young fellow, just the stuff, so they told him, out of which to make a dragoon, sinking the two years' riding-school drill indispensable for such a metamorphosis; and Jem, who had a vague idea in his cups that he might some day be tempted to "take the shilling," encouraged the idea, though he never went so far as actually to accept her Majesty's bounty.

Contented, as it seemed, with the quantity of liquor his military aspirations procured him free of expense, he would have enlisted long ago, like many another unquiet spirit, had it not been for his mother, but with all his faults there was this one redeeming point in Jem's character, that he loved old dame Batters in his heart. He was often hard in speech to her; he was rude and disrespectful in behaviour: but this was the rind, so to speak, and outer husk of the man. At the core,

he would have made any sacrifice rather than vex "mother," and the old woman knew it.

"He's not so steady, our Jim ain't;" she would say to her cronies by the fire-side, "not so steady as some on 'em, but he's a good son, is Jem, and always has been, there! and always will be."

Jem did not look very steady now, with a red neckcloth untied, and foolish eyes shining out from a pale face, in the dull stare of intoxication. Belter glanced down at him, half sympathizing, half scornful, but appeared to think no further interference necessary, for he gathered up the top-boots, and resumed his walk to barracks, without troubling himself any more about his helpless acquaintance.

Preserving his burden carefully from a light drizzling rain, now beginning to fall, the bătman entered the barracks, and proceeded to the officers' quarters with his usual steady gait, and immovable, not to say vacant, expression of countenance.

Only a man familiar with its every nook and corner could have found his way along the passage and up the gloomy staircase, whereon a feeble oil-lamp shed the smallest possible amount of light, without tumbling over a certain empty chest and

iron coal-box, that fortified the approaches to his destination. Belter, however, walked confidently on till he reached a dirty and dilapidated door, on which was painted, in letters nearly obliterated, "Offs.' Qrs. No. 5." Here he gave two solemn consecutive thumps with his sturdy knuckles, and followed his summons at once into the apartment, after the manner of these domestics, without waiting for an answer from within.

There is no greater contrast than that afforded by the inside and outside of an officer's barrack-room. The passage was as dark, dirty, and dismal, as can be conceived. The bare boards—for of course it was uncarpeted—stood an inch deep in dried mud, brought in by many a pair of regulation boots and clinking spurs. It was scarcely better lighted by day than by night, and besides the dreary chest and coal-box above mentioned, there was not an article of furniture to be seen, suggestive of a civilized dwelling-place; but no sooner had the bātmān closed the door behind him, than he entered an apartment overflowing with every modern comfort, convenience, and luxury, all portable moreover, and made to be packed up and carried about wherever the regiment moved in its



change of quarters. There was a Brussels carpet, there was even a hearth-rug, whereon a royal Bengal tiger, gorgeous in colour, and of abnormal stripes, was worked in tapestry; there was a couch, of ample width and proportions, forming a sofa by day and a bedstead by night, of which the brass knobs and general iron-work denoted that it could be taken away in a baggage-waggon at five minutes' notice; there was an easy-chair, of the easiest description, draped with a real tiger skin, obviously no relation to the monster on the hearth-rug; there was a table that made a chest, and a chest that made a table, both adorned with rich coverings of gaudy hues, and littered with their respective treasures; gold-topped scent-bottles, silver dressing things, ivory hair-brushes—all the appliances of an elaborate, and indeed lady-like toilet, except a mirror, represented in this martial domicile by a four-inch shaving-glass, hung on a nail in the window-sill. Several gun-cases were stowed away in corners, surmounted by trophies, consisting of Eastern sabres, regulation swords, cherry-stick pipes, riding whips, umbrellas, and sabretasches. Innumerable boots were ranged in military order against the walls, and at least twenty pairs of

spurs, inclusive of those expressly manufactured with smooth rowels, for dancing, occupied the chimney-piece, forming indeed, with the green plush cushion on which they reposed, its principal ornament.

Above the fireplace hung a photographic print of the *Ariadne*, supported by a portrait of "Beeswing," in oils, and a likeness of "Tom Sayers," in water-colours; the mare looking a good deal more attenuated by training than the champion. An embroidered cigar-case lay open by a gold-laced forage-cap, where both had been cast aside hurriedly on the couch, and a deep tin bath, yet steaming with hot soap-and-water, from which the occupant had lately emerged, like Venus from the sea, filled the apartment with a misty vapour, that mingled heavily with its habitual odours of saddlery, blacking, varnish, aromatic perfumes, and stale tobacco-smoke.

Ragman de Rolle, formerly of Eton College, Bucks, middle division, fifth form, and No. 9, in the ten-oar, late of Christ Church, Oxford—whence, I am concerned to add, he was rusticated for breach of discipline, before the completion of his second term—and now subaltern in her Majesty's

Loyal Dancing Hussars, having just washed himself, after his day's exercise, from top to toe, is preparing to smoke his fifth and last cigar before dinner, in all the comfort of warmth, clean linen, and a fancy costume of velvet, such as in these days has completely superseded the old-fashioned dressing gown.

Mr. de Rolle poises the Havannah in his fingers, and eyes the top-boots which Belter is disposing in military line with their comrades. To judge by his countenance, he has very little on his mind, nor a mind indeed constructed to carry any considerable burden at a time, but his face is rosy and good-humoured ; his figure, though somewhat thick and lumpy for a light dragoon, is vigorous and full of health, whilst his clear eye, and glossy hair, denote that good digestion, without which no mortal can be said to enjoy his fair share of physical happiness. Envidable man ! he has but one anxiety at present—he is a little apprehensive, not without reason, of growing too fat—and meditates “Banting,” though he has not yet become a disciple of the Great Attenuator.

“Belter,” says his master, after a pause of deep thought, “those tops must be three shades

lighter, at least. You've browned them to mahogany, and I like them the colour of double Gloucester cheese."

Belter springs to "attention," not a twitch crosses that well-drilled servant's face. "Very good, sir," is all the answer, and yet the complexion of these tops is the curse and the trial of Belter's life. "He'll be druv to drink, he knows it," as he tells Overall, in moments of convivial confidence. "It's trouble as done it, all along o' them tops; but he'll be druv to drink, see if he aint." Then he finishes his beer with a sigh, and walks steadily off, once more to resume his boot-trees, and his brush-case, and his daily efforts at the unattainable.

"Shall I clean 'em all over again, sir?" asks Belter, hopelessly, pointing to at least half-a-dozen pair.

"Yes—no," answers Cornet de Rolle, for he is a good natured cornet enough, notwithstanding his peculiar taste in colours. "Only mind next time to turn me out properly. Hang it, man, if you want a pattern, go and buy a cheese, and copy it! Come in!"

The last two words are roared out pretty loudly,

in answer to a summons at the door, from a heavy kick, which nearly drives in the panels, followed by the entrance of a young man, with a short black pipe in his mouth, emitting fragrant odours of Latakia. He is clad in a shooting dress of knickerbockers, leggings, Hylthe boots, grey jerkin, felt hat, with black cock's feather, and, in short, the usual war-paint of a "brave," in the present day.

"Halloo, Rags!" said the new comer, removing the pipe from between two rows of very white teeth, under a silky and carefully-trimmed moustache. "Look here, old fellow, you must take my orderly duty to-morrow; I've promised to go to Tollesdale, for a crack at old Waywarden's pheasants, and I quite forgot I should have the belt on. Never mind, I can do yours next time, so it's all right."

Now "Rags," as his brother officers called him, would much prefer having the morrow to himself, not that he has anything particular to do, but like all idle men, he enjoys and appreciates the pleasures of indolence for its own sake, yet he consents at once to this off-hand arrangement of his friend, and resigns himself without a murmur

to his imprisonment, with the many parades, inspections, and other duties, enforced by the rigid discipline of the Dancing Hussars.

The truth is, Walter Brooke, the most popular, and indeed, as it is sometimes called, *par excellence*, the *show* man of his regiment, had obtained over none of his comrades so complete and unquestioned an influence as over "Rags." To imitate, as far as circumstances permitted, his pattern's dress, walk, manner, tastes, pursuits, and sentiments, was the one study of Ragman de Rolle's life. It was a failure, of course. All such imitations are, and indeed the honest, good-humoured Cornet was perhaps less than most men fitted to engraft upon his own sturdy person, and frank disposition, the air of a somewhat spoilt dandy, and what is called "a finished man of the world." Rags was a good fellow enough, not bright, nor quick-witted, but with a certain plodding sense of right, and nice feeling of honour, that guided his conduct as safely as any amount of wordly wisdom. Of old family, as his name implied, his grandfather and father had both been in trade, bringing to their business much of the energy, and a spice of the adventurous spirit, that distinguished their mail-clad ancestors.

Consequently, they made money fast, and all they had they left to Rags. A cornet, even in a crack cavalry regiment, whose income is numbered by thousands, finds himself a very rich man, and liable to be spoilt by adulation outside the barrack gates, although, to do them justice, the mere possession of wealth affects his popularity very little amongst his brother officers within. Nevertheless, if he is of a free, good-humoured and jovial character, it is not to be supposed that a "balance at his bankers'" is likely to lower him in their favour, and "Rags," as he was universally called, found the path of life made very smooth and easy for him, rolled, as it were, and gravelled, with plenty of ripe fruit and blooming flowers, to pluck by the way.

Like many others, he was scarcely aware of his own advantages. From his mother, a comely Scotchwoman of the middle class, he inherited a considerable amount of diffidence and rather large hands and feet, to equalize, perhaps, the enviable gifts of an even temper and a faultless digestion. He was not much at home in the drawing-room; but quite in his element in the barrack-yard. It was told of him, that on one occasion,

sitting between two fine ladies in a tent at an archery meeting, and finding nothing to say to either, he laid down knife and fork submissively, and looking from one to the other, thus appealed to both in the plaintive accents of despair, "Can't ye *speak* to a fellow?" Being *very* fine ladies, they were amused, and therefore delighted with him, encouraging and making much of him during the rest of the afternoon—vowing he was an original and a quiz. But the last accusation fell harmless; for those who knew him ever so little, felt there could be no deception about Rags. Dull, honest, sincere, jovial, and good-tempered, his character is best summed up in his own avowal of his tastes and predilections.

"I ain't much of a ladies' man, I know," quoth Rags, when taxed with disinclination to female society. "I'm more at home with men, ye see. I hope I should run straight anywhere; but I like soldiering—I like barracks. I like my cool bottle of claret and my weed after dinner, and a mess-table suits me down to the ground." So he did his duty, rode with his squadron, and smoked his cigar in great comfort and content; firmly persuaded that life had nothing better to offer



than the good opinion of his brother officers, and speedy promotion to a troop in the Dancing Hussars.

Walter Brooke, puffing the short pipe with his back to the fire, was a very different person in every respect from his easy-going friend. When I say he was the most popular man in the regiment, I do not mean that he was the most beloved; but that his opinion carried more weight, and his personal influence was greater than that of any one else, from the war-worn old Colonel, browned and bleached by an Indian sun, and counting nearly as many wounds as he had clasps and medals on his brave old breast—to the Paymaster, twenty stone in weight, never known to be out of humour, and, from his very duties, an official with whom it was important to be on the most friendly terms. Either of these, and indeed many other members of the corps, had won more affection; but none commanded so much admiration as Walter Brooke. I believe his secret was this:—Whatever he did, he had the knack of making it appear he could do better if he chose. There was a quiet, matter-of-course consciousness of superiority in his manner: perhaps the result of natural audacity and self-

reliance ; perhaps assumed from motives of calculation, by one who was shrewd enough to know that in society the world assesses a man at his own valuation, which led people to think there was considerable power latent in Brooke's character, only wanting opportunity to display itself; that he had it "*in him, sir!*" so they said, "and some day it would come *out.*" When people talk thus, they are prepared for a very favourable judgment. It enhances their own penetration, and everybody likes to nod sagaciously, yet not without triumph, and say, "I told you so!"

Walter Brooke was careful never to over-do the thing. He was no boaster, but by inference—no swaggerer, save by implication. He seemed to say less than he knew, and to mean more than he said. Generally cool, always collected, neither subject to the influence of bodily caloric nor mental excitement, he had the credit of steadier nerves and a better temper than he really possessed. Decidedly good-looking—at least so the women said—he enjoyed the further advantage of a figure which coats and other articles of attire fitted of their own accord, while his hands and feet seemed made on purpose for the gloves and

boots he wore. Walter spent less money on his personal adornment than any other *young* man in the regiment—and not a tithe of what Rags did—yet they admitted unanimously (and this is no mild panegyric), that for all external qualifications, either in or out of uniform, Brooke was “quite the Hussar!” The men were not perhaps so fond of him as the officers. He was aware of this, and it annoyed him, for he knew that his inferiors are nicer judges of a gentleman than his equals. It may be that in his intercourse with them, more opportunities arise for testing the *true* politeness which comes from the heart; it may be that they place their standard higher, as not aspiring to reach it themselves; but the coarser, commoner clay seems always very ready to detect flaws in the porcelain; and if you must needs set up a golden image, and would prove the brightness and purity of the metal, find out how it looks from *below*.

So Rags agreed to do Walter's duty, and bade him draw the other easy-chair to the fire, and smoke at his ease, asking him hospitably, at the same time, “Whether he wouldn't take anything to drink?”

His friend seemed somewhat restless, and not in the best humour. Ignoring the invitation both for rest and refreshment, he stood with his back to the fire and puffed savagely at the short pipe during several seconds, then he broke out :

“What a wretched day’s sport ! How infernally they mismanage the whole thing now that the governor’s laid up. Not that it was much better in *his* time, with their ridiculous fancies about the tenants and the ground game. Old Halfcock’s superannuated. It’s time he was pensioned off, or shot, or put out of the way somehow. I tell you, Rags, we ought to have had five hundred pheasants to-day in those coverts, if they were properly looked after. I was quite ashamed (though I’ve nothing to do with it), when I saw you fellows on the patch of mangold-wurtzel at the end of the fox covert. The few pheasants there were went back, and you’d only one ‘rocketer,’ only *one*, I’ll swear, for I saw it.”

“And I missed him,” said Rags, good-humouredly ; who, to do him justice, could usually make good practice with his breech-loader, even at “rocketers.”

“And you missed him,” repeated the other, with

rather a contemptuous smile ; adding, between a volley of little short, angry puffs, "It always will be so, as long as Jack has the management. Jack won't listen to anybody. Jack won't go anywhere to see how the thing ought to be done. Jack don't even like my bringing out two guns. It's perfectly ridiculous in these days ; but Jack is so painfully slow."

"Well, I thought we had some pretty shooting enough," interposed Rags, uneasily divided between his natural spirit of contentment and the impossibility of thinking differently from his friend. "I had very good fun with the rabbits in the copsewood ; and, by Jove ! Walter, that's something like beer, that stuff you gave us at luncheon."

"Oh ! of course, if you go in for beer," answered the other, with a sneer, "it's a different thing. You'd better take a share in the brewery with that precious Mr. Stoney they always think it necessary to ask to Bridlemere. What the governor sees in him is more than I can tell. Jack is hand-in-glove with him, of course ; he's just such another fellow himself."

"He's not half a bad shot," said honest Rags, thinking the while of a certain woodcock between

the trees, which Philip had turned over in very workmanlike style.

“He’s not half a *good* one,” replied Walter. “Besides, the fellow’s a snob. The governor used to be more particular when we were boys. I don’t mean to say there’s any harm in Stoney ; but he’s in trade, my good fellow, don’t you see ? He’s in *trade* !”

“Oh, of course ! Exactly !” answered poor Rags, who had not the courage to confess he thought none the worse of him for that. “You must draw the line somewhere, I suppose. Don’t you dine with us to-night, Walter ?” he added, getting off the treacherous ground as quick as he could ; for Rags was very sensitive on the subject of birth—a weakness probably inherited from a plebeian mother, rather than from a long line of male ancestors, who were paladins in plate-armour, centuries before the Brookes of Bridlemere had ever been heard of.

“Not to-night,” answered his friend, kicking the coals into a flame with the heel of his neat shooting-boot. “Waywarden expects me to dinner, and I dare say will give me a pretty good one ; though he’s never had what I call a *real* cook

since Ravigotte left. I wish you were coming, Rags; old Waywarden's a capital fellow, and shows a good deal of proper feeling about claret. My lady is always pleasantest in a small party; and Lady Julia's a nice girl enough, though it's the fashion to abuse her. I wish you were coming, we could ride over together."

Rags devoutly wished it too. All this, being interpreted, meant—"I, Walter Brooke, with my advantages of birth, manner, impudence, and appearance, hold a position to which you, Ragman de Rolle, cannot aspire. Tollesdale is one of the great houses, with its indispensable accessories of magnificence, exclusiveness, and a French cook. Its mistress is one of the few fine ladies left; rejoicing, after the manner of her kind, in a pomp of dignified inanity, and a reign of terrorism, supported by the cowardice of the oppressed. The daughter of the house, I suppose, would hardly condescend to admit the existence of a fellow like *you*—a mere subaltern of light dragoons, unacknowledged by St. James's Street, and only known in Pall Mall to the messenger of the Army and Navy Club. Yet, behold! I am at home in these enchanted regions. I can criticise the claret, and find fault with the

dinners. I can brave the crushing manners of the mother, and even speak of the daughter with half-pitying approval, and charitable allowances for her failings. I am one of them. Don't you envy me? You are not!"

Rags did envy him; though, to do him justice, it was less for the pleasures of the evening than the morrow. Nay, had he been invited, he could probably have been induced to face Lady Waywarden's drawing-room, only by the anticipation of the following day's sport amongst the belts and hedgerows of the Home Farm at Tollesdale, and the "hot corner" in the park, at the back of the keeper's house.

This young man, you see, had not passed the period of life when field-sports, in some dispositions, seem to be an absolute necessity of existence. In later years, though even old blood boils and thrills under the influence of a rattling gallop amongst large fences, or at the ringing of shots and cheer of beaters, in a deep, stately woodland, gaudy with the red, russet, and deep brown hues of Autumn's last caress, these pleasures are taken sparingly as they come, and at least with an outward show of sobriety and



moderation ; but in the morning of life, when the bloom is rosy on the cheek and the beard soft on the chin, to miss a good day's shooting by some untoward accident—to be stopped hunting by an untimely frost ; these are disappointments which the untried philosophy of inexperience accepts with a frank avowal of vexation and disgust.

Despite a wholesome fear of the ladies, Rags would have liked nothing better than to order portmanteau and breech-loaders to be got ready for Tollesdale.

“How are you going ?” he asked, after a pause, during which, for the hundredth time that week, he had been wishing that he could change places with Walter Brooke. “I can lend you my trap, if you like. It's a darkish night, and Belter says it's beginning to rain. Sober John will get you there under the hour.”

“Sober John has quite enough to do, grinding about the country with his master,” answered Walter, who never scrupled to avail himself of that useful animal when he wanted him. “And as for his getting there by dinner-time, why, Rags, if you'll give me five minutes' start, and lay me three to two, I'll undertake to beat him on foot,

and trundle a hoop before me the whole way! No. I shall canter Jack's cob over, and send him back to Bridlemere in the morning."

"But won't your brother want him?" said good-natured Rags. "I heard him talk of riding somewhere to-morrow, while we were at luncheon. I can lend him one of mine, if he likes, you know, as I shall be doing your duty."

"Oh! never mind Jack," answered the younger brother, filling his pipe, and preparing for a start. "We've some long distances next week; we shall want all the hacks. Jack don't mind; he'll walk. Jack's a capital walker. Good night, old fellow; I must make running, for I'm late as it is."

So Walter Brooke groped his way down the dark staircase to the door where brother Jack's pony stood in waiting, held by an unbraced and bare-armed dragoon. He was in the saddle, and away without loss of time, the man looking after him with a grim half-doubtful approval, as the pony's hoofs clattered out of the barrack-gate, and down the slippery, ill-paved street. Walter would have ridden his own horse, or even one belonging to Rags, carefully over such ground, however much he might have been hurried, but he

had accustomed himself to treat everything of his elder brother with a recklessness, which arose not so much from want of proper feeling as from the generous character and utter unselfishness of the owner. Whatever belonged to Jack Brooke, was at the service of everyone who wanted it. Such a disposition need not go beyond its own family circle to indulge its peculiar weakness. Jack seldom had a shilling in his pocket, or a good coat to his back; to-morrow he must trudge many a mile through the muddy lanes, because Walter, with plenty of horses at command, had borrowed his pony for a mere whim of his own, and Jack, though justly prizing the animal, never dreamt for a moment of saying "No."

It was a good pony, no doubt, and sure-footed, as Walter could not but admit, whilst rattling it fifteen miles an hour down hill, on the stones; nevertheless, for all his hurry, he too paused when he arrived at the bridge, looking wistfully, even as Philip Stoney had done, over the parapet, listening to the murmuring wind, and the quiet lapping of the waters.

For a few moments he seemed lost in thought, and laid the rein on the pony's neck; then, ere he

tightened it once more, and gave the animal a hint to go on, he spoke aloud :

“Rum girl, Nell! Wish she’d marry Rags. Yet I don’t know how we should get on without her at Bridlemere. Somehow, it wouldn’t seem like home without Nell!”



## CHAPTER III.

### THE BROOKES.

**N**ELL, all unconscious, was playing the pianoforte the while, by the light of a wood fire, glowing and crackling under the ample chimney-piece of the old library, at Bridlemere. The old library that—because it had never been intended for the purpose—had gradually become the favourite sitting-room of the whole house. It was very lofty, with deep narrow windows, looking on a little sheltered flower garden, with oak floor and wainscoting; with a ceiling in sufficiently bad taste, on which the different coats-of-arms of the Brookes were picked out in scarlet and gold—perhaps I ought to say, “gules and or.” The bookcases at Bridlemere were not so well furnished as the cellars;

and large gaps on their shelves, which should have been filled with intellectual food, were littered with fly-hooks, fishing-tackle, work-boxes, backgammon boards, battledores, shuttlecocks, and such miscellaneous articles as are apt to accumulate in any large room of a country house to which young ladies and gentlemen habitually resort. Bridlemere was an overgrown, old-fashioned building—partly of the Restoration, partly of Queen Anne's time—and had little pretension to regularity of architecture or arrangement. The dining-room was the smallest and the worst on the ground floor; the drawing-room the prettiest and the coldest. The best bed-rooms were ghostly, and uncomfortable to a degree—much too large, and in sad want of new furniture; while in the "Bachelors' Gallery," as it was called, a guest might find himself in the cosiest and neatest of retreats, bright with French paper and flowering chintz, replete with every appliance for cleanliness and comfort, fragrant with the woodbine that trailed and twined about the window, and commanding an uninterrupted view of the tops of some elms, an ivy-covered tower, and the broad face of the stable clock. It is pleasant to lie in

bed in such a room as this, and watch the rooks wheeling against an April sky ; listening to their cawing through the open window, and looking forward to a day of happy country idleness—only happy and enjoyable when earned by a previous period of honest anxiety and toil. Below stairs, doubtless, Bridlemere was cheerful enough—the servants took care of that. For good fires and strong tea, commend me to the steward's room and the servants' hall ; but, certainly, the darkest and gloomiest apartment in the whole house was that in which the family chose habitually to reside.

They might have made it a little more cheerful too, with a few prints or pictures, of which there was no want in other parts of the building ; prints representing many a spirited scene of country and sporting life. Dogs and deer from Landseer, that you could not look at for five minutes without feeling the wild breeze off the heather, and fancying you smelt the peat smoke. Horses from Rosa Bonheur, snorting lifelike in the playfulness of wanton fear ; or cattle coming out of their frames with meek wistful eyes, and wet healthy muzzles, and the dew of morning glistening on their shaggy

russet hides. Pictures, too, of many a periwigged gallant, and tight-waisted dame; the gentleman invariably thrusting on public notice a pale and slender hand; the lady displaying with much liberality a long white neck and bosom. But none of these were admitted to the library, perhaps lest they should withdraw the visitors' attention from its great pictorial *chef-d'œuvre* and work of art—The Family Tree of the Brookes of Bridlemere.

It was all very well for the Craddocks of Caradoc, now Dukes of Merthyr-Tydvil and Severnside, Earls of Caradoc and Lionesse, Barons Bonspiel in the Peerage of Scotland, and all the rest of it, whose ancestors sat with King Arthur at his Round Table, and held their heads high even then, as having “come in” with King Cole, to look down in pitying condescension on the antiquity of the Brookes. It was all very well for Lord Waywarden, of the illustrious race of Treadwell (the first Treadwell ennobled was bootmaker to Charles the Second), to assume a priority over the Brookes, as his rank entitled him, at all county meetings or social gatherings; and for Lady Waywarden to speak of them as “very good sort of people, whom



she was always delighted to see"—which she was *not*. The Brookes, I say, esteemed their own pedigree infinitely superior to what they considered the fabulous ancestry of the Duke, and the mercantile origin of the Earl. To be a Brooke was with them tantamount to a diploma, vouching not only for birth, but for beauty, talent, manners, probity, all the advantages, external and internal, that are assumed, like gout, to be transmitted from one generation to another through the blood.

The Family Tree, however, on examination, scarcely afforded sufficient reason for inordinate pride of birth. Notwithstanding that in its many roots, suckers, and ramifications, it resembled that redundant plant, "The Auricaria," called irreverently "The Puzzle Monkey"—notwithstanding that it required much practice, a clear head, and a sharp-pointed pencil besides, to follow out all the marriages and intermarriages of the different shoots, terminating too often in a little open circle like a medal, with some barren spinster's name solitary in the midst—notwithstanding that the attention was much distracted from its main trunk, by foreign grafts and excrescences

allied to houses, which again were allied to royalty, it seemed pretty clear that the family knew little about their origin prior to the appearance of a certain Sir Geoffrey Brooke, who did good service in the cause of royalty during the Rebellion, and would have assuredly been killed or taken prisoner with his stand of pikes at Marston Moor, had he not run away, like many another gallant cavalier, when the action became too hot for him.

From an old yellow letter—of which the ribbon that once fastened it, according to the fashion of the time, though much worn and frayed, was in better preservation than any other part of the missive—it appeared that Sir Geoffrey, before going into battle, had commended to the care of his loyal wife and sweetheart, to whom it was addressed, his poor old father, under the title of a simple yeoman and franklin, giving thanks to Heaven, at the same time, with quaint and sincere self-gratulation for his own advancement in life. This letter, though carefully preserved, was nevertheless ignored by the family, who preferred a far-fetched theory of their own regarding Sir Geoffrey's origin, and affected to consider him as a younger branch of the Devonshire De Brokes, hereditary

grand posset-bearers to the Plantagenet kings, and found in old charters seised of certain fiefs and manors, now lapsed to the Crown.

They might have been satisfied, nevertheless, with their own Sir Geoffrey as he stood—an honest, God-fearing old cavalier, who stuck to church and sceptre, fought as well as his neighbours, and swore by Prince Rupert, who lived to see “the king enjoy his own again,” and to win for himself, though history does not explain how, a goodly tale of rich acres in the vicinity of Middlesworth, where he built the oldest and least commodious parts of the house now standing, and died in it at something over four-score—the first of the Brookes of Bridlemere.

The Court of the “Merry Monarch,” with its reckless pursuit of pleasure, its taste for meretricious display, and its unbounded licence of manners, served to ruin the fortunes of such Royalist families as did not succeed in obtaining places or monopolies under its patronage, quite as surely, and almost as rapidly as reverses at Edge Hill and Naseby, or fines inflicted by the Parliament and the Protector. Rank, in a second generation, has at all times been prone to affect the pomps and

vanities, rather than the duties of its position. Sir Egremont, son to Sir Geoffrey, shook the dice at Whitehall, and ran short-tailed horses at Newmarket, to a tune which levelled half the West Avenue, and melted away many a score of fat acres round Bridlemere. There was a picture of him over the dining-room sideboard, representing a handsome, but clownish and sullen-looking man, with a periwig, a breastplate, and a tall glass of wine in his hand (artist unknown), which formed a striking contrast to the likeness of his father by his side, whose weather-beaten, war-worn visage was depicted simpering under his steel head-piece, turned carelessly away from a dirty-faced page, a fore-shortened charger, and a general action raging furiously in the background. Sir Egremont not only dissipated his property, but also married his dairymaid, and thus on the first opportunity struck a deadly blow at the aristocratic pretensions of his house.

The dairymaid had a large progeny of daughters, branching out, indeed, all over the genealogical tree; some wedded to diverse plebeian surnames; some dying like ungathered roses on the parent stem. The property now passed

into possession of a family named Brown, and a stranger could not commit a greater solecism, nor put a deeper affront on either race, than to confuse the Browns and the Brookes of Bridlemere.

One of Sir Egremont's married daughters, however, must have preserved her patronymic; for in George the First's reign, and after the Browns had added a wing and put their mansion into thorough repair, a young Dorcas Brooke appears on the stage as the last remaining scion of her name, and to Dorcas Brooke appertains a pretty little romance, commemorated among the archives of her family by a bad picture in oils, and a long account in manuscript.

This young lady, it appears, dwelt with her aunt and uncle by marriage, the latter a saddler and harness-maker in the City. She seems to have been a fair young lady, and an amiable, also more venturous than other damsels of her class, inheriting, perhaps, something of old Sir Geoffrey's energy and resolution of character.

London, in the reign of George the First, was not safe to walk about in at night as it is now; there were Mohocks in those days, as there have been garotters since. Perhaps, too, the

anti-Mohocks, like the anti-garotters, contributed largely to the general confusion after dark. A nervous passenger would whip his sword out, fancying he was going to be attacked, and become himself the occasion of the very brawl he dreaded, as in later times we have heard of impulsive gentlemen who would run a muck with "life-preservers" and "knuckle-dusters," persuaded that the stranger humbly asking his way was some perfidious brigand, scientific in gripe as a Thug, and backed by a swarm of confederate assassins round the corner.

The Mohocks, however, were the greater pest to the public, that they slew and maltreated people for sheer amusement. To be drunk with wine by two o'clock in the day; to "keep it up" with bowls of steaming punch and cups of burnt brandy during the afternoon; to "crack t'other bottle," as it was called, at supper, and then sally forth for the express purpose of insulting women, stabbing men, and beating the watch, was the correct routine of a "blood's" life in those fine old-fashioned times, which some people, I understand, can still be found to regret.

Dorcas Brooke, however, was a good little girl

enough, coquettish it may be, and not averse to admiration, yet none the less womanly and kind hearted for these natural failings of her sex, and Dorcas Brooke was not to be deterred by all the Mohocks in London from regular attendance at a sewing society in the next street, held twice a week, for the purposes of conversation and charity, retailing gossip, and furnishing the indigent with clothes. Wrapped in her muffler, a pretty white hand peeping out to clasp it round her throat, and her dainty feet tripping lightly over the mud, from gutter to gutter, Dorcas went backwards and forwards from her home to her sewing society, without taking much notice of the admiration, generally expressed with oaths, that she called forth. One tall man, in a cloak, watched her regularly for a fortnight; and so did a shorter, squarer, sturdier person, of less aristocratic exterior, only she did not remark the latter. The tall man ventured to accost her before long, and although she was greatly shocked at the liberty, how do we know that it was so very disagreeable, after all, or that she had not implied, as damsels will, by some almost imperceptible hitch of her garments, some unnecessary adjustment of her veil—

“If you follow me, I shall be angry; if you speak to me, I shall scream! and yet I shall be a little disappointed if you don’t do both!” The tall man, however, was a Mohock when required. The third week he had a hackney-coach waiting, and a couple of ruffians ready to help his prey into the vehicle. She was a light weight; a shawl would gag her pretty mouth and easily stifle her cries. It was but lifting her in, and the thing was done. Such trifles took place nightly in that golden age. It was, therefore, well for Dorcas that she had another follower, watchful and unsuspected, of less aristocratic appearance, but of honester nature, stiffly built withal, and holding a good oak cudgel in his hand.

These affrays are soon over. There was a piercing whistle; a scuffling of feet; a hoarse, suppressed voice muttered, “My darling, I won’t hurt you!” and a shrill, angry one screamed out, “Let me go, sir! Help! Murder! Let—” Then one of the ruffians went down on the stones, with the blood streaming from his scone, the rapier flew in shivers out of the tall man’s grasp, and the saddler’s apprentice flourished his cudgel between Dorcas and her assailant, executing a war-



dance in the mud that bade defiance to a legion, and hallooing for the watch with might and main the while. The tall man took to his heels and fled; the fallen accomplice lay senseless where he fell; his comrade jumped on the box with the hackney-coachman, and drove off. The watch never came at all, and Dorcas walked silently home with her uncle's apprentice, longing to thank him heartily, but not daring to speak, for she knew she should burst out crying directly if she ventured to open her lips. Nor was her champion one whit less taciturn. Bayard might have been more courtly in manner, but not more chivalrous at heart. Also, in the presence of Dorcas, he was shy, mute, and awkward. Her aunt thought him "a poor creature," so she said, "easily dashed, and for all his broad shoulders he hasn't the heart of a chicken; not he! Now look at Dorcas; the spirit of the girl! But then, to be sure, she's a Brooke!" It is my own opinion that neither of its participators alluded to the evening's adventure or its termination, after Dorcas said "Good night! Oh, thank you!" at the street-door, and hurried upstairs for the "good cry" that could be delayed no longer. Neverthe-

less, there must have been thereafter a tacit understanding between the two; and, I dare say, at meals, the only times they met, the apprentice would raise his eyes timidly to seek the girl's, and avert them the instant they caught her glance.

It is obvious that when two people are at opposite ends of a line, and wish to meet at a given point, one must take the initiative, and move in the desired direction, if it be but an inch at a time. To do women justice, they shrink sensitively from thus commencing operations, and as long as there is a chance of the advance originating with the adversary, they are as retiring as the snail within its shell; but when the lover so far forgets his masculine prerogative of solicitation as to remain a longing devotee rather than a brisk assailant (and it is provoking to reflect that the truer his affection, the less it seems to sue for a return), why then, rather than that the game should languish altogether, and die out for want of players, she will emerge cautiously, gradually, yet very obviously, from her reserve, and give him to understand that she is neither so coy, nor so indifferent, nor so hard-hearted as he seems to believe. The saddler's apprentice must have

gathered a deal of encouragement from his master's niece, in the shape of stolen glances and approving smiles, ere he could summon courage to offer her his escort on the river, when she took boat at Whitefriars for a voyage into the country as far as Westminster. That her aunt made no objections is only to be accounted for on that principle which, in all ages and societies, has trusted "the cat to keep the cream." In the present instance, the cream was not the least afraid of the cat; and the latter, although an inexperienced mouser, was delighted with its charge.

There could be but one result to such an expedition. The waterman, a staunch Hanoverian, full of ale and loyalty, ran them aground in some three feet of water. Dorcas, losing her footing and her presence of mind simultaneously, upset the wherry with much dexterity, and the apprentice, in a laced waistcoat, knee-breeches, and full-skirted coat, waded with his dripping burden to the bank, and felt his head swim with a vague delirious happiness when he imprinted his first kiss on her pretty lips, while she clasped her arms round his neck, and vowed he was her defender and preserver, and had saved her a second time

from death. The waterman, who was too drunk to walk ashore, was in most danger of the three ; nevertheless, the young people, ignoring the shallowness of the river, voted it a rescue, and henceforth became avowed sweethearts, only waiting for an opportunity to declare themselves.

So presently the apprentice was "out of his time," and, earning good wages, married his master's niece, who thus exchanged the cherished patronymic of Brooke for the less noble name of Housings—an exchange that only lasted till the next generation, for Master Housings, in some forty years' practice, amassed a large fortune by the leather trade, and pretty Dorcas lived to see her grandfather's roof over her head, and was buried in the country churchyard at Bridlemere. It was, perhaps, her aunt's untiring influence that stimulated this prosperous London tradesman to purchase the acres she persisted in terming his wife's ancestral property—an influence none the weaker that she never neglected to remind him of his inferior birth during her lifetime, and left him a good round sum of money at her death. Master Housings and his Dorcas ended their days then at Bridlemere (Lord Waywarden maintains even now

that the place was so called to commemorate the saddler's employment ; but such an assertion is directly refuted by the title-deeds of this estate, held by one Brown), and their children, by royal licence, took the name and arms of the Brookes of Bridlemere.

Two or three succeeding Squires drew their rents and drank their port in the old house without becoming in any way remarkable. The last bought pictures ; and the present, till his health failed him, kept hounds. Both succeeded in impoverishing their estate, and the energy of another Sir Geoffrey, or the good sense of another Master Housings, was beginning to be wanted for the repair of the family fortunes. Nevertheless, the Brookes held a high station amongst the county people. They could go back honestly to Sir Geoffrey, and, by a perverse train of reasoning common to mankind, descent is the more valued the further off it is from an illustrious ancestor, and, consequently, the less there is of his blood in the veins of his posterity. The present Squire, like the others, was, above all things, proud of being a Brooke. As he watched the firelight flickering on Nell's black braided hair, crimsoning

her sweet pale forehead, and throwing a saffron tinge on the keys of the pianoforte, from which her white hands were pressing out a low, pleading, mournful symphony, dwelling, as if they loved it, on each sad harmonious chord, he was not thanking God, who gave him, in his helpless age, the love of such a daughter, but congratulating himself rather on the two stalwart sons, who should perpetuate in the male line the Brookes of Bridlemere. Helen was a good girl, no doubt—a good girl and a bonny one—but it was well, he thought, that he had nearly twelve feet of manhood, besides, to look to, lest the race might become extinct.

The Squire had been a stalwart, well-grown man in his prime—could cheer his hounds and ride his horses with unfailing lungs and vigorous dexterity. There were old women about the place now, still hale and hearty, who remembered “his eyes as bright as diamonds, bless you! and his hair as black as your hat. Such a hearty, well-limbed man as our Squire was, and a free gentleman, too; with a word for everybody—gentle and simple, rich and poor;” whilst an old-fashioned attorney in Middlesworth, with a red

nose and white neckcloth, quoted Squire Brooke, as "the best judge of port wine in the country; but a careful man of his health, always, and an abstemious, never taking more than his one bottle a day!" He had been a good shot, of course; an active, but somewhat pig-headed magistrate, and an invaluable auxiliary at all agricultural dinners, cattle-shows, and such public gatherings of the landed interest and its supporters.

Now he could not walk across the room without assistance. Powerless below the waist, his arms and shoulders still retained something of their former vigorous mould, and there was brightness in his eye, and colour in his cheek still; but his hair and whiskers had turned white since his attack, and he betrayed, at times, a querulous irritability foreign to his character, denoting too plainly the approach of a general break-up. One doctor called it rheumatism; another, suppressed gout; a third thought that his liver was affected, and a fourth considered the general system too low in tone. Nobody sent for a strange practitioner, lest he should blurt out the right name, and declare it paralysis. It would have been a friendly deed—it would have been the action of a kind

and brave man to tell Squire Brooke the truth. It seems hard that the wayfarer should be the last person warned of his inevitable journey—should never know he is going to start till the long narrow box is as good as ordered and ready for packing—till the horses are actually pawing and snorting in his hearse.

The Squire sat in the warmth of the chimney-corner; a newspaper lay beside him; but from the habits of his old active life, he never read it till evening. He was dressed in an out-of-doors costume, with his poor helpless legs incased in stout shooting-boots and gaiters. His hat neatly brushed, his gloves carefully folded, his stick ready to support him, were placed within reach on a chair by his side. Every morning Helen went through the same routine, unvaried now for months. After breakfast, she looked at the thermometer, and told her father the exact temperature (he was very particular about this); then at the barometer, and recorded its changes: setting it by his directions with great care. Then she went out at the hall-door, wet or dry, and furnished her own report of the atmosphere, seldom tallying with that afforded by the mercury.



This performance accomplished, the Squire would say, "Helen, my dear, I've a good deal to do at the Home Farm; but I think I shall not go out till the afternoon."

At first, she liked to hear him talk so, for it gave her hope. After a time, when he got no better, she would turn away to conceal her tears. At last, she became used to this as to other distressing symptoms, and grew to consider it as one of the details—nor indeed the most trying one—of her father's illness and her own daily duties. She had plenty to attend to—calls for the exercise of thoughtfulness, patience, and self-denial, every hour of the day. Her brothers consulted "Nell" in all their complications of stables, kennel, or other opportunities for mismanagement. She was expected to remember their engagements, and get them out of their difficulties of forgetfulness or incivility. She had to sew the buttons on their gloves, and keep them supplied with stationery, stamps, paper-lights, and other miscellaneous articles which men seem to think grow of their own accord in sleeping and sitting rooms, like daisies in a May meadow-ground. Moreover, they asked her advice in every conceivable

dilemma, and never took it on any subject whatever.

Then the servants came to Miss Helen for orders, bringing her, in return, complaints of overcharge from the tradesmen, and reports of each other's short-comings, which they thought it "their duty to name;" but which could never be substantiated on further inquiry, and poured in her ready ear many a dolorous statement with which they would not venture "to trouble the Squire." She had lost her mother several years before, and Helen was well accustomed to a position which demands, more than any other, the qualities of tact, and good-temper, viz., the acceptance of responsibility without authority.

But it was as a daughter that the girl shone in her brightest lustre. She had always been devoted to papa, from the time when she used to toddle after him on sturdy little bare legs, round the Home Farm, tumbling about sadly amongst the turnips, and holding tight by his forefinger in the straw-yard, where dwelt those huge horned monsters that visited her in her dreams. From those early days, when she thought him the noblest, the wisest, and the most gigantic of men, till

now that she knew herself the prop and mainstay of the poor bleached, withered old cripple, she had never wavered one hair's breadth in her affection, though year by year it changed its character, progressing through the successive phases of admiration, confidence, anxiety, pity, and protecting love.

The Squire accepted it all, as, if men were wise, they would be careful ever to accept the devotion of the other sex, with a lofty royal condescension, that seemed to expect attachment and homage as a right.

Loyalty, I think, must be a special characteristic of womanhood. They seldom rebel till the monarch himself shows symptoms of weakness or abdication. What taxes, too, will they not bear, so long as he imposes them with a firm and temperate hand? Whilst he remains on the daïs, they are the sincerest, though the subtlest of courtiers; but let him not descend to meet them on an equal footing in the hall; and if he place them on a pedestal above his own level, woe betide him! He will surely find that the pretty head turns giddy with elevation, and the little feet can trample hard and heavy on the prostrate

ruler who has voluntarily yielded up his natural sway.

The Squire had accustomed himself to be tended and nursed, and waited on by his child, till it seemed only natural that all Helen's pleasures, amusements, and pursuits, should give way to every whim of the invalid. She seldom left him for more than a couple of hours at a time, and nobody knew how often she had denied herself a ball, a pic-nic, or an archery meeting, lest the worn face in the arm-chair should look wistfully round for her and find her not—lest the querulous voice complaining from habit to Helen, should become more querulous and irritable because she was beyond hearing of its wail.

The country people, voted Miss Brooke a little shy, and a little proud. It may be she *had* a spice of both these failings. On the few occasions when she *did* appear, the young men fell in love at first sight; but after a quadrille, or a dinner-party, became somewhat afraid of her, confiding to each other in elegant figures of speech, that she was “a clever-shaped one; but *slow*, and not much *in* her.” Nevertheless, it might be seen, by the earnest way they took their hats off when she

bowed—which she did somewhat haughtily, I admit—that they liked her to notice them. The ladies were less outspoken in their decision. They had “heard she was a very nice girl. For their own part, they shouldn’t call her exactly handsome.” It is needless, therefore, to observe, that Miss Brooke’s exterior was sufficiently pleasing in the eyes of the other sex.

She was a stately looking young woman. She carried herself naturally in a more queenly fashion than is usual with a country gentleman’s daughter. She possessed what is called a very thorough-bred air—not that this advantage is by any means monopolised by our aristocracy—and her reserved manner was probably much increased by the life she led, and her habit of thinking for every one in the house. Her head and neck were extremely well put on, particularly when you saw her *en profile*. She could look very high and mighty when she drew herself up, which she was apt to do from shyness, oftener than was necessary; but when she bent over her work, or stooped down to caress a dog or a child, there was something very gentle and womanly in her gestures, that accorded well with the expression of

her fair low forehead, and the gentle, trustful look in her large dark eyes. Hers was not one of those faces which derive so much beauty, and that too of a very fascinating kind, from brilliancy of colouring, and mobility of feature. Helen was nearly always pale, and so calm she was almost severe; but if in an unguarded moment a thought or feeling was permitted to express itself unreservedly on her face, men turned their eyes quickly away, and as quickly looked at her again, in the instinctive homage the boldest cannot but pay to a high type of feminine attraction.

Had she been more liberal of her smiles, she might have easily claimed the championship—if I may use such an expression—in every ball-room of the shire. Had she looked at any other man as she did now from under her long dark eyelashes at her father, down he must have come, I think, unless shortsighted, or lately married, or very deeply pre-engaged—down like a wild bird, shot deftly under the wing, wounded and fluttering, and helpless at her feet!

She closed the pianoforte, and came round still with that smile on her face, to her father's chair. Whatever Helen did was done noiselessly; her

dress never rustled, and she could even read the newspaper without crackling it. "Papa," she said, "let us put off the Dacres and the Stoneys. There will be plenty of time for me to write a line now, before the post goes."

The Squire struck both hands angrily against the arms of his chair, making a movement as if he would get upon his feet—"Put off the Dacres and the Stoneys, Helen! Good gracious! what are you dreaming of? Why on earth do you suppose I asked them if I'm to put them off? You don't think I'm *worse*, do you?"

His voice shook painfully, but it was partly from anger. He was easily irritated now, particularly when his health was alluded to.

"Dear papa," persisted Helen, "you know Mrs. Dacre has a bad cold, and the chances are she will send an excuse at the last moment; in which case she won't let *him* come alone. Walter is gone to Tollesdale, and he never knows when he will be back; people like so to have him. You see, there would only be the Stoneys, and Jack, and I."

"Then you count *me* for nothing!" exclaimed the Squire. "Considering that I have been in this

cursed chair for—for—how long have I been in this cursed chair, Helen? Considering that it's *my* house, and *my* servants, and *my* wine, I think I might be permitted to sit at my own table! If the doctors think I am going to dine at two o'clock every day, they're infernally mistaken, and so I tell them! Why, it's not till Tuesday. I expect to get out to-morrow, if it's anything like a fine day; and I *must* go to the Home Farm on Monday, at all risks. I suppose I may have some dinner after my walk, eh, Helen? Neither you nor the doctors are fools enough to forbid me that! And this isn't till Tuesday! Why, on Tuesday, I expect to be nearly as well as ever I was in my life. A little heavier, perhaps, for want of exercise; but quite strong again—quite strong again."

Now, these dinner parties were amongst the weekly trials of Helen's life. The Squire persisted in asking his friends and neighbours to dine with him, as he used when he could sit at the end of his table, and carve his saddle of mutton, and drink his bottle of port. Ay, and play his rubber of whist till twelve o'clock at night. Now, early hours and complete repose were absolutely enjoined. Nor, had he been equal to the exertion



of entertaining his guests, would the excitement of their society have been permitted by the doctors. Nevertheless, he would take counsel with his children whom he should ask, and with his cook what they should have for dinner ; and send off invitations for a party of fourteen with far more eagerness than he ever showed when he was strong and well. Perhaps the bustle and excitement of the project may have served to amuse him, but he was nevertheless very irritable while its arrangements were pending ; very querulous and desponding the day after the feast at which he had been unable to attend.

It was no easy task for a young girl to preside and do the honours of a large party, chiefly country neighbours, neither very bright nor very sociable ; but of this duty she acquitted herself wonderfully well. What Helen dreaded was the effect of these Barmecide entertainments, both past and prospective, upon her father.

It was worse, too, when Walter was away from home. That young Hussar seemed to have acquired an ascendancy over the Squire, such as was acknowledged by his brother officers. In the presence of his second son, Mr. Brooke was

ashamed to indulge the querulous habits of bad health, and assumed, as far as he could, the tone of a man of the world. A visit from Walter always seemed to do him good; but on the days he felt weakest, he declined to see him; and when he was at his worst, he liked nobody but Helen to be in the room.

“So Walter is off to Tollesdale—off to Tollesdale,” repeated the Squire, after a pause. “Quite right, quite right. Young men should go into society, good society, the best they can command. And the Waywardens are civil to Walter, are they? Popular fellow, Walter; twice the brains of Jack, eh, Helen? And Waywarden’s a good-natured man: old friend of mine, though he never comes to see me now.”

His voice dropped, for he was thinking of the days when he could beat Waywarden over a country, and shoot quicker at pheasants, and when in one of these amusements or the other, they used to meet three or four times a week. He would have taken it very kindly had the latter ridden over to see him a little oftener; and his old friend would have grudged neither time nor distance, but that he fancied he should only be in

the way in a sick room, forgetting that the Squire, as a Christian, loved his neighbour, and none the less when that neighbour was a Peer. Mr. Brooke liked to think of Walter flourishing about amongst these grandees, riding as good horses and wearing as smart clothes as the best of them, though he never seemed to consider how these advantages were to be paid for, nor dreamt of increasing his younger son's allowance to meet the expenses such society entails.

There are many fathers who have no scruple in pushing the earthen vessel out to swim downstream with the iron pots, and think they have a right to be angry when it breaks and fills, and sinks to rise no more. Were it not that the iron pots, as a class, are very considerate and very good-natured, these shipwrecks would occur far oftener than they do. Mr. Brooke, reflecting on his own choice piece of porcelain, began to think he should like it to be present at his dinner-party.

"Of course Walter will be back by Tuesday, Helen?" said he, more cheerfully. "We shall want his help to do the honours, and talk to the young ladies. I forget who are coming, Helen. I've got your list somewhere, but I've mislaid it

Ring the bell, dear ; or, no, put a little more wood on the fire."

Helen stirred the logs into a flame, as usual, to please him ; then she went over, for the twentieth time since luncheon, the roll of invited guests. The Smiths, who couldn't come ; the Greens, who hadn't sent an answer ; the Daeres, who were doubtful ; and lastly, the Stoneys, who had accepted, "with thanks."

A dinner-party in the country is apt to prove a failure from the difficulty of getting your forces together at the last moment. Like an invading army, its available strength is far less than that which it shows on paper. In London, you send out your invitations three weeks beforehand, and the invited come as solemnly, as tardily, and apparently as unwillingly, as they would to pay any other just and unavoidable debt. Moreover, the gaps between your couples are filled with professional diners-out—men who make a regular business of the thing, and whose conversation, cut fresh from the evening paper and the topics of the afternoon, will no more keep till to-morrow than the flowers in your epergne. Therefore, if they are alive, come they will, and you need fear

no far-fetched excuses to disappoint you at the last moment.

I do not mean to say that the entertainment is likely to be cool, roomy, comfortable, or in any way particularly pleasant ; but it is pretty sure to take place, and there is an end of it ; whereas, in the country, you may lose four of your party at once on the day itself by such a trifling casualty as the breaking of a spring, or the illness of a coach-horse. If it is a frosty night, your richest elderly lady probably fails you from sheer poltroonery ; if a thaw, your handsomest and most eligible young man is likely to be wading up a muddy lane with a tired hunter a dozen miles off, when he ought to be simpering over his soup plate at your dinner-table. The undertaking is beset with difficulties ; and even if it succeeds, in nine cases out of ten, it proves one of the many games which are not worth the candle that lights them.

Helen never argued with nor contradicted her father. She let him run on and exhaust his petulance unopposed, returning, as it wore itself out, with the gentle persistency of woman, again and again to the attack.

"Walter will be back the end of the week," she said. "If we could put off the dinner-party, papa, we might make sure of having him to help us."

"I don't require any help!" answered the Squire, quickly. "Still, Walter makes himself agreeable, and brings us all the news. And you say the Dacres won't come, you think, Helen?"

"Sure not, papa," was the reply; "We all know what Mrs. Daere's colds are: they mean, 'I won't take any trouble about anything for a fortnight.'"

The Squire wavered. Still he could not at once relinquish the idea of his dinner-party. It was a sort of *point d'appui* for his poor, weak, helpless, vacillating mind.

"But there are the Stoneys," said he; "three of them, for I told you to ask Philip particularly. *Did* you ask Philip particularly, Helen?"

She had turned to make the fire up again.

"Yes, papa," she answered; "I wrote him a separate note in your name."

"Three of them," mused Mr. Brooke. "I don't think we can put three of them off. It is not as if we had only asked two. What should *you* say,

Helen? Don't you think it would seem very odd, if we put three of them off?"

But Helen was firm. He had come round, as usual, to her way of thinking, by imperceptible degrees, and thought he had converted her to his own opinion. So she lit the candles on the writing-table, and sat down to her task, taking great pains, as ladies do, with the penmanship and superscription of her letters, and composing, as her father desired, a particular and separate note to Mr. Philip Stoney.



## CHAPTER IV.

### STONEY BROTHERS.

**Q**UOTE all the flirts in and about Middlesworth, I doubt if there was one who could bear comparison with a young lady now occupying the hearth-rug at the feet of Philip Stoney, divested of his shooting dress, clean, hungry, and waiting for the important hour of dinner. That this person was four years of age, wearing her legs bare, likewise her shoulders, and her frock in as untidy a state as constant revision by mamma and nurse would permit, is simply an aggravation of the charge, inasmuch as dishevelment and general disorder of costume did but enhance the peculiar style of coquetry which she found irresistible by many of her own, and all of the opposite sex.



Without being a pretty child, except in so far as healthy children cannot help being pretty, rosy cheeks and dancing eyes, and an impudent nose, with a profusion of curling brown hair, imparted to this little lady quite pretension enough on which to found a dynasty that had gradually usurped dominion over the whole house. That she had a Christian name I assume from presumptive sponsorial evidence, afforded by a fairy-like fork and spoon, with a red case, also a silver toast-and-water mug in her possession. But such baptismal appellation was entirely superfluous, inasmuch as nobody, in or out of the family, ever dreamed of calling her anything but "Dot;" and a very troublesome, quaint, and noisy little personage Dot could be, at no time more so than at the period,

"Between the dark and the daylight,  
Which is called the children's hour."

Philip was warming himself (like an Englishman) at the fire. Dot sat on the hearth-rug at his feet. She brandished a pair of scissors (points blunted for family use), and was cutting a paper pattern of mamma's into a device which it had

by no means been originally intended to represent.

After an unbroken silence of some thirty seconds, Dot looked up.

"Uncle Phil," said she, shaking the curls off her face, "when am I to be your wife?"

This was a matrimonial arrangement long since concluded, and now established as a matter of course by the lady, with whom, indeed, it originated.

"Not at all, Dot," answered Uncle Phil. "I am afraid of undertaking the job. I've changed my mind."

"Are you going to have another wife?" asked Dot, very graciously, and quite unmoved by her favourite's inconstancy.

Philip smiled, and smothered a sigh, while he thought how unlikely such an event was; and Dot proceeded with the utmost gravity:

"Because, mamma said this morning that Phil was too good to be a *bachelore*, and when I asked what a *bachelore* was, she said papa was one before he married. And I thought, perhaps, you would be good enough for me to be your wife very soon, and then we could go to that place you

told me of, where the beasts are, like my Noah's Ark."

Dot had already a very feminine notion of a wedding trip, combining, as far as practicable, amusement with romance. Every child has its own ideal region of enchantment, and Dot's Utopia was "where the beasts were, like her Noah's Ark."

Uncle Phil sat down, and his torment, reaching his knee at a bound, proceeded to the constant and never-failing resource of opening and shutting his watch.

"We'll see about it, Dot," said he, smoothing the glossy head. "I think the beasts would all be afraid of you; you're such a little vixen."

"What's a vixen?" asked Dot. "Wind it up, uncle Phil! What's a vixen?" she repeated, with a quick look in his face. "Is Jane one? Is mamma a vixen?"

Philip laughed outright. "Here she comes, Dot," said he; "you had better ask her yourself;" and the words were scarce out of his mouth, ere Dot, whose motions were like quicksilver, had made a dive at mamma, and was lost in the ample folds of that lady's gown. Anything less like a

vixen than Mrs. George Stoney could hardly be imagined. She was a stout, untidy, comely sort of woman, motherly, to say the least, in her dress and exterior; of considerable presence, whichever way you looked at her, and generally, with a large, healthy, hungry baby in her arms. She had a fine figure, so to speak, run to seed; fine dresses, ill put on; fine hair, neither well-brushed nor carefully arranged; and fine features, which nothing could spoil. She could not have been *always* nursing, yet her appearance never failed to suggest a general idea of nutrition; and her demeanour, with its heavy, languid step, and slow imposing gestures, was a happy combination of the matronly and the imperial.

Her conversation, too, was of the same handsome, careless, untidy character as herself. She liked fine phrases, as she liked fine gowns, and used the words as inappropriately as the dresses. Even at home, she was very fond of speaking like a book, and held, that next to her maternal duties, eloquence was, of all things, to be cultivated by a woman. Fortunately, a slow delivery, and a West-country accent, prevented the torrent of her oratory from becoming overpowering; and as the

millers sleep sound through the accustomed thunder, of his mill, and only wakens up when the wheel stops, so did Mr. George Stoney find himself quite undisturbed by his wife's rhetoric, answering too often, like other husbands, instinctively, and at random, without in the least comprehending the purport of a single question addressed.

With men, Mrs. Stoney was rather popular than otherwise. They admired her fine points, and laughed good-humouredly at her fine phrases, ignoring their misapplication, or setting down her mistakes, as they will, to the score of feminine ignorance and incapacity. Amongst her own sex, opinions as to her merits varied in accordance with the social standing of those who broached them. The poor thought her "a noble lady," as indeed they had good cause. The tradespeople considered "she gave herself airs to which she was not entitled;" for this class of persons only tolerate and even admire bad manners, when covered with a coronet. The doctor's sister, the rector's lady, and one or two neighbouring Squires voted her "a vulgar, trapesing woman, and just what they expected from the first;" whilst Lady Waywarden, I fear, ignored her altogether, and

none the less loftily, that Waywarden, some years ago, had been heard to declare at a Middlesworth ball, she was "out-and-out, the handsomest woman in the room!"

Mrs. George Stoney, however, permitted herself to be but little affected by the suffrages of her neighbours. What with marketing, shopping, the production and sustenance of infants, the unpicking of dresses, the supervision of servants, and the struggle for supremacy with Dot, time did not hang heavy on her hands. All the languor she indulged in was confined to her manners, and she could bustle about below-stairs, on occasion, with a vigour and activity quite remarkable in so ample and majestic a personage. Dot was devoted to her. She herself thought she was the only person who kept Dot in order, but to this opinion the latter did by no means subscribe, and the question was tried at least half-a-dozen times a day, usually with the same result, a signal and complete victory on the part of the child. Philip got on admirably with his sister-in-law, perhaps for the very reason, that no two people could be less alike in every respect, and altogether, no more united family sat down to dinner in Middles-

worth than that which surrounded the dining-table of the comfortable villa inhabited by Stoney Brothers.

“George is late,” remarked his wife, ringing the bell with one large white hand, and imprisoning Dot with the other. “He has not been in ten minutes, but it never takes him long to make his toilet. He’s an elegant figure, George; and the children take after him. He’ll be here before the soup now. Dot! *will* you leave the fire-irons alone?”

Dot’s attention was at this juncture fortunately arrested by the simultaneous entrance of papa, who was always an attraction, and the soup, borne by a clean, tidy looking parlour-maid, whose connection with a certain store-room, and the jam thereto belonging, gave her opinions considerable weight amongst the inhabitants of the nursery. It was at her instance that Dot consented to be removed, ostensibly to superintend the putting to bed of her juniors; and as the young lady was replaced by a tureen of hot soup, the three sat down to dinner in considerable comfort and tranquillity. George Stoney was several years older than his brother. He had the worn and somewhat

subdued air of a man whose whole life has been spent in the toils of business, in work not adapted to his tastes, and that taxed his powers to the utmost. There are two sorts of men in trade, equally energetic, perhaps, and equally successful, but who wear their good fortune, as Ophelia says of her rue, "with a difference." Those to whom business is their natural element, thrive and grow fat upon it; they are younger and fresher men of their years than the British yeoman himself. But the others, who put their shoulders perhaps no less assiduously to the wheel, yet who cannot cheat themselves into the belief that labour and pleasure are convertible terms, who do the drudgery, and do it thoroughly, but only because it *must* be done to pay the premiums on their life-assurances for wife and children; who stand at the desk, when they would fain be breasting a mountain, and long for the saddle, while perched high on an office-stool; these men have thin hands and hollow voices, weak hair, streaked with grey before its time, a stoop in the shoulders, marked lines about the mouth, and, Oh! such a wistful look in the weary, weary eyes, as if they longed so for rest, that they would be content to find it even in the



grave. George Stoney was active, painstaking, intelligent, but his natural element was leisure and retirement. He would, probably, have been equally successful as a scholar, had his lot been cast amongst a different kind of books from those which he compared and posted so carefully; unquestionably he would have looked ten years younger, and he would certainly have been a happier man.

Refined in character, cautious, and a little indolent of disposition, shrinking almost sensitively from everything noisy, exaggerated, or in bad taste, averse even to so much of strife as must constitute the necessary competition of trade, he was a dreamer—almost a poet in heart; though externally, both in dress, manner, and habits, as prosaic a personage as it is possible even for the British merchant to be. Such a man was sure to marry a woman of far coarser mental texture than his own, and, having married her, was equally sure to abandon the reins of government to her grasp as far as she liked to possess them. Intellect, from its very nature, is too often hampered by facility of character and love of ease; such a combination cannot but give way when opposed

to a firm and thick-skinned disposition ; strong in its will as its affections, regardless of those nicer shades of feeling which do not practically affect its well-being, and rejoicing in that useful self-confidence, which, however unwarranted, is so often justified by results. It is only fair to say, however, that in the present instance, the lady confined her energies to domestic sway. She never interfered with the business, and the brewery was conducted, unquestionably, by the firm of Stoney Brothers, though inside the villa Mrs. George's word was law.

This brewery, then, well known, long established, and ministering to the thirst of more than half the villages in the county, was considered to be the best business doing in the town of Middlesworth. Its magnificent greys were to be seen at all hours resting their nose-bags to feed on each other's backs. Its waggon's clattered and jingled along the ill-paved streets, waking the echoes and shaking the windows as they rolled by. Its draymen, jolly and gigantic, were walking advertisements of the stuff on which they flourished, and "Stoney's Entire" seemed synonymous with John Barleycorn himself.

For many years the firm had done well, and amassed considerable profits in a dark, mysterious-looking building, far down a by-street, through which it was a miracle how the waggons and the greys, and the draymen ever wound their way; but the spirit of enterprise had of late prompted Stoney Brothers to quit their old premises, and erect a magnificent pile of classical proportions in the most frequented part of the town, where greys and drays, and waggoners, should be permanently quartered, and which should become the colossal emporium, as it were, and fountain-head, of the very strongest beer (for the money), that could be brewed by the power of steam.

Old grey-headed tradesmen who remembered Middlesworth before the days of railroads, "small profits, and quick returns" men—who ate and slept in their places of business, and were proud of it; who "kept the shop as the shop kept them," looked with no favourable eyes on the new brewery, sagaciously opining that Stoney Brothers were "reaching their hands out further than they could draw them back again;" but the younger division of the mercantile interest—the

modern class of shopkeepers—approved much of the whole proceeding, and Mr. Dowlas, the draper, an eloquent person, with a taste for public speaking and Mechanics' Institutes, declared it was “refreshing to witness such a bold and comprehensive spirit of enterprise, which deserved, even if it failed, to command success!”

There was one person, however, who could not bring himself to entertain these sanguine views of the new undertaking, on whose peace of mind the huge erection seemed to press, with the specific weight of the very bricks and mortar of which it was composed. George Stoney had looked, if possible, graver and wearier than ever, since the foundations of the building had been laid. It was only after long consideration that he had given his consent to its commencement, after carefully inspecting the plans, and reducing the estimates, and calculating the expense. When fairly begun, nobody could have shown more energy and activity in furthering its completion; but even Mrs. Stoney observed that George grew quieter —“more absorbed in thought,” she called it—day by day; and Dot, standing on papa's knee, and taking stock, as usual, of his eyebrows, whiskers,

&c., was delighted to find how many more of those "nice white hairs" she could discover every time she looked for them.

To your own family your symptoms are never so alarming as to strangers. Meeting you every day, changes are to them imperceptible, which your visitors, as they drive away, tell each other "they were quite shocked to perceive." Illness is like age. You fondly imagine, the man you shave to-day is very like what he was when you began to shave him thirty years ago; and the wife of your bosom, if always with you, never looks older than when she was a bride. Thus the gradual decline from indisposition to weakness, and from weakness to ill-health, is only observed by your doctor. And when the inmates of your household begin to see a difference in your appearance, depend upon it, the last change of all is not very far off.

At the dinner-table, the conversation was principally between Philip and his sister-in-law. The latter moistening her remarks pretty plentifully with the beer of the firm, as indeed she had a good right, from conviction of its excellence, and conscious want of its sustaining power within.

There was no ostentation about the repast, but all its accessories were close at hand without the trouble of asking for them. The linen was soft and white, the plates too hot to hold, the silver shone, the glass sparkled, and the dumb-waiter was scarcely quieter, or more indispensable than the noiseless parlour-maid, who removed and changed the dishes with each succeeding course. That parlour-maid's ribbons always looked new. For the first month, her mistress vowed daily, "Jane wouldn't suit," on the score of being "dressy;" but Jane's clean hands and willing face, and tidy, active ways, soon gained for her the reputation of being "a treasure." Dot, too, entertained morbid feelings about her merits. "Altogether," as she wrote to her sister, "the place was suitable, and she had no intentions of leaving of it."

Mrs. Stoney looked very ample and handsome, dispensing the good things before her to her husband and his brother. Neither of them, to use her own expression, "took as much animal food" as she thought good for them. Her own idea was, that the more a man ate and drank, the stronger he must necessarily become. She would have

liked to feed her husband as often as she did the baby in possession. George Stoney, lifting his head languidly to decline any more of his own beer, was admonished, that "if he would neither eat nor drink at dinner, he must promise to take two or three glasses of good wine afterwards. "If once you let the system down," argued Mrs. Stoney, "every medical man will tell you he cannot answer for the consequences. Look at me ; I'm sure I can't think whatever I should do without my beer. Philip there is afraid of his waist, I know, but you've no need to be apprehensive on that score, George. Your dancing days are over, my dear ; something like my own."

Mrs. Stoney was fond of asserting her matronly exemption from the delights of the dance ; claiming privilege on the score of superannuation, which it was pleasant to hear indignantly denied. This self-depreciation, too, was purely theoretical ; inasmuch as she liked nothing better than to swim through a quadrille, with the majestic and imposing progress of a first-class ship under easy sail ; and my own impression is, that she abstained from waltzing, less from a sense of decorum, than a specific gravity of person, which rendered that

measure too laborious and breathless an effort for recreation, and only to be risked on great occasions, once or twice a year.

"I've other things than dancing to attend to," said her husband, abstractedly; "and if I hadn't, Bell," he added, with a smile, "I don't think Middlesworth is much of a place for that amusement."

"I declare if he hasn't forgotten our ball!" exclaimed Mrs. George, clapping her hands with a peal of laughter, and turning to her brother-in-law. "Now, that's George all over. I'll undertake to say *you've* been thinking about it, Philip, more than enough, and are engaged, a dozen deep beforehand, with all the prettiest partners in the town. Ah, it's a great pleasure, is a ball, to young people! though there's many a heart-ache comes from it afterwards; and a head-ache, too," added she reflectively, "if Mr. Dribblet furnishes the champagne, as usual, at supper."

"Both are easily got rid of," answered Philip, "and both are easily avoided, if a man knows what he's about. You needn't dance, if you can't take care of your heart; and you needn't drink champagne, if you're not sure of your stomach."



"If I was a man, I'd run my chance of both," replied Mrs. George Stoney. "Nothing venture, nothing have! Phil; and, 'faint heart never won fair lady.' But you don't get off so easily from our Middlesworth balls. London parties may be better, and more crowded, if you come to that; but nobody shall persuade me they can be more genteel."

"I know nothing about London," said Philip, who seemed a little restless and inclined to change the subject. "I am not much of a judge in such matters, but these seem well enough in their way."

"Well enough in their way!" echoed his sister-in-law. "Why, George, did you ever hear anything like that?"

"Anything like what?" asked her husband, waking up from a dreaming fit, and relapsing without waiting for an answer; while his wife, who was used to his abstraction, continued the conversation without him.

"I'm sure, Philip, I wonder what you'd have, if these balls are not good enough for you. I've seen a good deal of life in my time, as a girl, you know, Phil, before I married your brother. The very first people, both from the barracks

and the dock-yard, were always welcome in my father's house: but if you ask me, I declare I don't know when I've set eyes on so many elegantly dressed females, and gentlemen of really fashionable exterior, as attended our Middlesworth ball this time last year. And it's been the same ever since I've known the town. If it wasn't for what I call the 'stuck-up set,' who always will get by themselves at the top end of the room, there'd be nothing equal to our balls—nothing!”

Mrs. Stoney flourished her large well-shaped hand and arm, with a gesture that seemed to defy contradiction.

“I've seen some very handsome people at that end too,” observed Philip, with a little malice, and a slight accession of colour in his cheek. “Lady Julia kept her whole party there last year, and they say that she is reckoned quite a beauty, even in London.”

“I've no patience with her!” exclaimed Mrs. Stoney; “nor her mother neither. I blame Lady Waywarden far more than the girl; though, if you ask me, I think Lady Julia is rather inclined to be a romp. Such airs and graces, indeed! If we're not good enough to be in the same room

with them, why do they come, I should like to know ; I'm sure nobody wants 'em !”

This last assertion was somewhat inconsequent, inasmuch as these offenders contributed, at least, one-third of the ball-goers ; and if they had abstained from attending, because “nobody wanted them,” the assembly would have been shorn of a large and very ornamental portion of its attractions. The grievance, however, was of long standing. Mrs. Stoney said no more than the truth, when she declared it to be one of which she “could not speak with patience ;” moreover, it became year by year more confirmed amongst its originators, and more offensive to the rest of the society.

The Town Hall, wherein these solemnities were held, though a lofty and lengthy room, was, unfortunately, but of scanty width. The musicians' gallery, equally distant from both ends, and fronting an enormous fire-place, from before which the shy men were knocked out of time in about five minutes, almost divided it into two different apartments ; and in the one of these, furthest from the door, the county families had contracted a habit of congregating, huddled together like starlings

in a nor'wester, and offering considerable social difficulties to such adventurous youths as might desire to extricate their partners from the flock. It was in vain the townspeople, with Mrs. Stoney at their head, strove to form an opposition gathering of their own, and took possession of the other end, leaving a clear space in the midst, as though for some exhibition of posture-making or legerdemain. This only made matters worse. Few ladies, and still fewer gentlemen, ventured to cross the Debateable Land; and, instead of a festive gathering, these assemblies began to assume the aspect of an impending battle between opposing armies, with Amazons in the front rank.

Mrs. Stoney, indeed, had, on one occasion, reaped a signal and unexpected triumph. It was when Lord Waywarden, the most good-humoured and unaffected of men, who could hardly have been made to understand the difficulty, had it been explained to him, deliberately left his ranks, and selecting her from the opposition for a partner, led her triumphantly to the top of a quadrille at his own end of the room, where she had a Marquis for a *vis-à-vis*—an arrangement she did by no means dislike.

Nevertheless, such victories are too often fatal as defeats. The English fine lady *can* be the best bred woman in the world. It does not follow that she always *is*. When she means to be rude, she draws the bow with less compunction, and points her shafts more accurately, and more mercilessly from behind the shield of conventionality than any other archer in the battle. Ere Mrs. Stoney had swum through her quadrille, with no less, be sure, than her accustomed majesty, she wished in her heart she had never left the other end of the room. Women have a way of making each other uncomfortable, which the stupider sex can neither appreciate nor understand; and though Mrs. George carried her crest bravely through the figures, and did not lower an eyelash, under Lady Waywarden's cold, contemptuous stare, she was very glad to get back to her own party at the conclusion; and from that night hated the "stuck-up set" more than ever.

"Take away, Jane," said she to the parlour-maid, who had re-entered with dessert; and after whispering certain injunctions, of which the words "bed" and "Miss Dot" were alone audible, she turned to Philip, and resumed the subject that

about this time of year was generally uppermost in her mind.

“There’s beauty enough, and to spare, Phil,” said she, smoothing her own glossy bands of hair on her temples; “and this winter there will be more than ever; though, to be sure, I don’t think much of the new people at the Poplars; and I don’t see what there is in that Mrs. Dacre to make a fuss about. If she didn’t get her dresses straight from Paris, she’d be positively plain, to my fancy. Don’t you think so, Phil?”

Phil had not thought about it; scarcely knowing Mrs. Dacre, indeed, by sight; so he said “Yes,” with a clear conscience, and Mrs. George pursued her criticisms, well satisfied.

“Lady Julia will be there, I suppose, as usual? She’s a good figure of a girl, and a sweet dresser, Phil—there’s no denying that; but she’ll never have her father’s elegant manners; and I’m certain she’s freckled when you’re close to her. I declare, if she would only seem a little more unbending, there are none of them to beat my favourite, that dark-eyed Miss Brooke. Don’t you think Miss Brooke is a very handsome, aristocratic looking girl?”

But Philip's answer, if he made one, was lost in the wine-glass at his lips, for the subject was here brought to an abrupt termination by the apparition of Dot, rosy and tumbled, closely pursued by the parlour-maid, and obviously glowing with excitement from some overt act of successful rebellion.

The young lady's costume, too, was of the simplest and easiest. It consisted of a long white cotton garment, clinging closely round her slender little figure, and making it look absurdly limp and pliant. Her feet were bare, and her curls scattered over her shoulders. It was evident, even without Jane's disapproving face, that she had been permanently put to bed, and had jumped up again.

"Halloo! Dot!" "Why here's Dot!" sufficiently expressed her father's and uncle's astonishment, while mamma's "*Now* Dot!" denoted more displeasure than surprise. Whisking round the table, and dodging out of Jane's grasp, like an eel, the child sprang to Uncle Phil's knee, and explained her appearance with perfect frankness, and an air of determined resistance to injustice.

“My camel! my camel!” urged Dot, intensely in earnest. “I’ve said my prayers, and I’ve had my hair done, and I’ve been a good little girl; and I can’t go to bed without my camel!”

Jane here felt called upon to explain. “Miss Dot was very partial to her camel” (a rare specimen out of her Noah’s Ark, resembling, now the paint was worn off, no known creature upon earth), “and couldn’t never be got to bed without it”—a position the rebel seemed resolved to maintain: clasping Uncle Phil firmly round the neck, and from that point of vantage eyeing her pursuer with a comical expression of triumph and defiance.

It was evidently a case where nothing but mamma’s interference could prove of the slightest avail. Mrs. Stoney accordingly rose from the table, and quietly carried off the intruder in her arms, the latter glancing roguishly at Uncle Phil, over the maternal shoulder, and clenching her little fist on the regained treasure, which even in the moment of capture she had spied out, and picked off the hearth-rug, where she had been playing with it before dinner.

“After a storm comes a calm,” observed George



Stoney, pushing the decanter over to his brother, and relapsing into silence. .

Soon he looked up. "Those are my reasons, Phil," said he, reverting to Dot and her companions in the nursery, "for being so cautious. I sometimes think I'm not cautious enough for a man who has a wife and family dependent on his life almost for bread."

Philip knew well what was in his elder brother's mind. The latter could not bring himself to the belief that they had acted prudently in building the new brewery.

"It's nearly finished," said Philip in a hearty, cheery voice, answering his brother's thoughts rather than his words. "Nearly finished, and as good as paid for, in my opinion. I showed you the calculations I made yesterday. Look how the business will increase; why, in six months it will have doubled itself. In five years the capital will be paid up, and there you are with the fore-horse well by the head, as our people say—a rich man for good and all."

"Five years is a long time," replied George, looking thoughtfully into his glass. "Life's uncertain. I'm not such a hard fellow as you, Phil ;

and a good deal older into the bargain. Suppose I don't *last* five years?"

"Stuff and nonsense!" exclaimed the other. "You'll last fifty! Besides," he added in a tone of deep feeling, "I shall not be quite penniless. My share is a pretty good thing—at least, *I* think so, I can tell you. Then, if worst came to worst, d'ye think you're fonder of the children than I am? And Isabella has something, though it isn't much, of her own. Your life's insured, too. Don't croak, old boy! What are you thinking of?"

"That reminds me," observed George, more cheerfully, "we ought to insure the new place, now it's so nearly finished. I meant to speak to you about it to-day, before you went to Bridlemere."

"I've thought of that, too," answered Philip, joyfully. "We'll do it next week. Save a quarter's insurance; don't you see, George? Oh, trust me for looking after the main chance!"

"You're a better man of business than I am," replied the elder brother, "though I've had so much more experience. And you think the venture is sure to turn out successfully; don't you Phil?"

“Not a doubt of it,” answered the latter confidently. “No more wine, George, thank you. Yes, I will; I’ll have one glass, to drink “Good luck to the new brewery, and success to Stoney Brothers!”

George put a little sherry into the bottom of his glass, and pledged the hopeful toast. Nevertheless, the confidence was only forced in him, which was spontaneous in his brother. Their characters were different, both by nature and from the force of circumstances. Philip not only possessed the buoyant hope and energy of a young man who had never yet known serious disappointment; but he had also a resolute, and somewhat enterprising spirit, prone to adventure, and not to be deterred by the rebuffs of fortune. A thorough woman, the goddess is to be won both by readiness and persistency. Philip could repair a failure, as well as take advantage of a chance. At present, too, he seemed even more than ever to be working “with a will.” He wanted no holidays now, except, it may be, for an occasional day’s shooting at Bridlemere. Mrs. George began to suspect that this desire of money making must originate in something besides a love of independence for its own sake.

Her husband was not given to speculate on anything save future reverses in trade ; nevertheless, he, too, observed that Philip was never tired of talking "shop." Business seemed now to be the subject uppermost in his mind at all seasons.

To the very threshold of their pretty drawing-room—in which Mrs. Stoney, having put Dot and her camel to bed, was waiting tea for them—he urged the advantage of taking Jem Batters into their employment, at a somewhat lower rate of wages than the regular tariff ; and even while the door opened she heard her husband's quiet melancholy tones reminding his brother of the insurance, and the latter's triumphant rejoinder, that he had saved a quarter's interest—"A whole quarter's interest, George, by not being in too great a hurry!"



## CHAPTER V.

### TOLLESDALE.



NEED I make excuses for reverting to the subject of dinner—that principal event in the recurring day? From the acorn-eating age of the savage to the great discovery of truffles; from the Red Indian who loosens his hunger-belt, and goes in for a gorge on juicy hump and oily marrow off the fresh-killed buffalo, to the dandy (no longer very young), starched, curled, and perfumed, who sits down to twenty dishes, with no appetite, but tastes of each in turn, stimulated by dry champagne; all times and all classes have agreed to regard dinner as an Institution, to establish it as the axis round which the whole twenty-four hours revolve.

Nor must it necessarily be an extremely plenteous or elaborate repast. A crust of bread and cheese under a hedge ; a sandwich (mustard forgotten) on the heather ; a mutton chop, with another "to follow"—these simple provisions are competent, on occasion, and when nothing better can be had, to fill the place of a royal banquet, and afford as much satisfaction to the consumer as turtle and venison. There are but two conditions exacted for the sacrifice—the priest must be hungry and the offering clean. Then is there no necessity for great preparation, or "apparatus." Say grace, fall to, and if you cannot get a sip of sherry, or a glass of claret, or even a teaspoonful of alcohol, as a digestive, make the best of it, and finish off with a smoke.

I know not why the very people for whom this important meal is an affair of the greatest ceremony, who take the most pains to have it good, and when they do get it, spend the most time in its discussion, should put it off as long as they possibly can.

The Stoneys were adjourning for tea at eight o'clock. It was a quarter past before the party at Tollesdale had fairly sat down to dinner. Nor,

indeed, was their complement made up even at that late hour. Jack Brooke's was a capital pony, no doubt ; and Walter did not spare him as he galloped from the barracks. A good-looking young man, who wears his own hair and teeth, who does not require to curl his whiskers, and whose clothes are supplied (on credit) by the tailor most in vogue, ought to be able to dress for dinner in twenty-five minutes. Nevertheless, Walter contrived to make his entrance, and his bow to his hostess, as the soup disappeared, and sank into the seat reserved for him by Lady Waywarden, without thinking it necessary to excuse himself. Apologies in these days are never offered for anything ; and a good deal of trouble is, perhaps, saved by their abolition. They would have been insincere, too, in the present instance, for Walter was late on purpose. He was a dandy, you see ; and a certain affectation, properly toned down, was in keeping with the character. You must have attained your social position, whatever it may be, before you cease to care about it, and can afford to be natural. A man who wants to be thought wiser, or better, or richer than he is, can never quite dispense with sundry little artifices, sufficiently transparent to

those who know how much is done in society for effect.

In Walter's case, however, it is only fair to say, the effect was very good. Even Lady Waywarden admitted that he was "a gentleman-like, agreeable young man;" and her ladyship was by no means given to over-rate the social qualities of her fellow-creatures. She had the happy knack, too, of letting them feel that she made allowances, because so thoroughly satisfied of their inferiority; and this pleasant quality, combined with a stately figure and icy demeanour, rendered her a formidable personage even in London, and the terror of the whole country round Middlesworth.

She had been a beauty, in days when men admired a beauty, and women hated her more than they do now. The very mob cheered when she leant forward in the carriage at the bottom of St. James's Street, on her way to her first Drawing Room. They talked about her in the clubs the day she was presented, and took odds about "the double event" of Sal Volatile winning the Oaks, and her marrying the only disengaged duke, before Goodwood. She had very regular features, a beautiful skin, and an expression of countenance



denoting utter indifference to everything in the world. I don't believe she blushed when Lord Waywarden proposed to her (he had recently succeeded to the earldom), and I think she said "Yes," with as little emotion as if he had offered her a cup of tea. People whispered there was "a cousin in India, that she used to like;" but I consider this mere gossip. Indeed, unless he had been Governor-General, I am convinced "a cousin in India" would have stood but a poor chance.

At forty, Lady Waywarden had lost all pretensions to beauty. She looked the Countess (though she was a Commoner's daughter), and that was all. Like other fine ladies, she was active in mind, indolent in body. Though she spent the mornings in bed, and never walked a quarter of a mile from the hall-door, she did a great deal of good amongst her poor, and did it, too, in the most judicious, energetic and discriminating way; though she never pitied people, she was always ready to assist them; and much of her voluminous correspondence was occasioned by the public charities and benevolent associations, to which she was a generous and never-failing contributor. Waywarden was very fond of her, and let her do

exactly as she pleased. He was right: coercion had never been tried with this lady; and it is likely that hers would have been a very difficult spirit to control.

The dinner party consisted of five—perhaps I might say six, including Mr. Silke, the groom of the chambers; an important personage of refined appearance, whose duty seemed to consist in listening to everything that was said, and occasionally offering people sherry when they did not want it. There were a good many more servants, both in and out of livery, who waited as quietly as only very good servants can. His lordship was extremely particular, you see, and prided himself on the excellence of his domestic arrangements. There was only one house in England, he boasted, where “the thing” was as well done as at Tollesdale.

However disguised, Lord Waywarden could never have been taken for anything but a gentleman. Though he was short, broad-shouldered, and of a very powerful build, there was something in the carriage of his handsome bald head; something in his bold, pleasant Saxon face; something in his frank, straightforward and collected manner,

peculiar to the English nobleman. There is no class that combines so much of manliness with so much of refinement. Their bodies are vigorous, though their minds are cultivated; and the same individuals who are distinguished as scholars, statesmen, and diplomatists, have physical power to load coals or dig potatoes; and physical courage—"pluck" as it is now called—to do anything that can be attempted by man.

Nothing could be more different, however, than his lordship's outward appearance before and after half-past seven o'clock, p.m. In the morning, from the top of his low-crowned white hat to the nails in his heavy double-soled shoes, he dressed the practical agriculturist to the life. He had been a sportsman in his day, and could handle a gun still as well as most men; but he was now devoted heart and soul to the farm. Hour after hour he would trudge about his acres, heedless of wind and weather, intent only on draining, top-dressing, or turnips; and rejoicing in the very savour of the dung-heaps that smoked at regular intervals over the brown and wealthy soil. He could cheapen bullocks, too, at fair or market, and not a drover on the road would have let him pick

from his straggling charge, at the average price overhead of the herd. He could calculate the wool on a sheep, or the weight of a fat pig, at a glance; and his tenants affirmed that "my lord could buy e'er a one of 'em at one end of Middlesworth market, and sell him at the other!"

From his nine o'clock breakfast till he returned healthy, happy, and hungry at night, he was the farmer all over: but with the starched white neck-cloth, and portly white waistcoat, came a transformation; and at his own table no man could be more courtly, more polished, nor more agreeable than Lord Waywarden.

Walter was rather a favourite. My lord was so used to dandies, he did not mind them; and had, besides, a natural liking for one whom he had known from childhood, and who was the son of his old friend and neighbour, poor bedridden Squire Brooke. Frank and genial in his nature, he would enjoy his bottle of claret over the fire when the ladies left them after dinner, none the less that his guest was more than five-and-twenty years his junior, and must necessarily consider him "an old fogey" in his heart.

It appears then that the guest was by no means

in an enemy's country. Lord Waywarden liked him because he was used to him; Lady Waywarden liked him because he was not afraid of her; and here I may observe, that Walter feared no woman on earth. This immunity he had obtained at considerable personal sacrifice, by his former intimacy with the well-known Mrs. Major Shabracque, late of the Dancing Hussars, a dashing lady, who rode, drove, dressed, rouged, gambled, flirted, and, I believe, smoked; adding to these dubious tastes the more reprehensible pursuit of breaking-in raw cornets to the ways of the world, almost as fast as they joined. People said she had rather burnt her fingers with young Brooke, and took to liking *him*, when she only meant he should like *her*. But it seems improbable that a bold, brazen dame, of five-and-thirty, with the animal spirits and great experience of Mrs. Shabracque, should ever have played a losing hazard, except as a matter of calculation in the game. Be this as it may, Walter got tired of dangling about her at last, and emerged from the ordeal a good deal hardened externally, and if scorched within, only so far burnt as is good for the child, who must learn betimes to entertain a wholesome dread of

fire. After exposure to such a battery, all other artillery seemed but as a volley of small arms. Moreover, without knowing it, Walter had become, so to speak, "free of the guild." The women were civil to him wherever he went, and Lady Waywarden never dreamt of snubbing him as she snubbed his brother Jack.

With Mr. Silke, too, he was a prime favourite. Habits of personal extravagance, and a younger brother's liberality in *douceurs*, had completely won that functionary's affections; he really pressed him with the old sherry, and a certain white Burgundy, after cheese. Mr. Silke's own opinion was, that Captain Brooke, as he persisted in calling him, was "quite the gentleman."

Two more ladies made up the party. Miss Prince, who sat next to Walter, and although a little afraid of him, was delighted at her proximity to a live dandy. She, too, entertained certain prepossessions in his favour, though in an indirect way. Mr. Brooke's home was at Bridlemere; Bridlemere was near Middlesworth; in Middlesworth lived Mrs. George Stoney; and Mrs. George, when bouncing, handsome Isabella Richards, had been a pupil at a school—I beg pardon, an establishment—

whereof Miss Prince was erst part-proprietress, and principal teacher in all the most important arts and sciences constituting female education. How the little woman could know so much, yet be so silly, was a marvel : nevertheless, in spite of a nervous titter and foolish manner, and an insatiable tendency to ask questions, Miss Prince had a heart far too large in proportion for her body, and to the bottom of this great, simple, loving heart, Isabella Richards had found her way.

The former teacher had met with reverses, which she accepted in a humble, thankful spirit, that showed a good deal of Christian philosophy ; and when the establishment broke up, the poor part-proprietress went out as governess to Lady Julia Treadwell, at whose emancipation she consented to remain as a sort of companion to her mamma. She had a paralytic sister to provide for, of course. You never knew a woman totally unfitted to battle with the world, yet making a capital fight of it notwithstanding, who had not some drag of this description ; but through all her ups and downs, her debts and difficulties, Lady Julia's vagaries, and Lady Waywarden's whims, she preserved, as fresh as ever, her great love for Isabella Richards,

now Mrs. George Stoney. Though she marvelled much at his whiskers, his refinement, and the somnolency of his manners ("So unnatural in a young man, my dear," as she afterwards told Lady Julia), she could not but regard with considerable admiration so elaborate a specimen of his class as Walter Brooke. I think, next to personal courage, with which it is often associated, nothing goes down with women so well as personal vanity. The cockcomb runs the hero a very hard race, and a combination of both never fails to produce a winner.

Miss Prince, sitting on the edge of her chair, appealing constantly to her former pupil, and faltering a little when she caught Lady Waywarden's eye, laid siege to her neighbour in her own way, by plying him with a series of questions, chiefly, as being of engrossing interest to a soldier, on topics of military detail.

"And are all your men taught to ride by the same master, Captain Brooke?" asked Miss Prince, in a small, shrill, innocent voice. "And don't the music, and banners, and shooting off the guns, righten the horses? And when you go to the field of battle, is the Colonel obliged to go first? I'm so interested in the army. I had an uncle



once in the War Office. And why are your soldiers called light dragoons?"

Walter stared, and held his glass for dry champagne. These questions were indeed "posers," and while the thought flitted through his brain, "What the deuce makes the woman want to put *me* through my facings? Mad, of course"—he simply sipped his wine, and looked at Lady Julia, sitting opposite, who immediately took upon herself to reply.

"Because they've light heads, and light hearts, and light heels. Don't you know, Miss Prince, 'They love, and they ride away?' It's part of the system. The army couldn't go on without it."

"My dear Julia!" exclaimed her mother.

Miss Prince looked shocked; Lord Waywarden laughed; Lady Julia's eyes sparkled, and shot a shaft or two at Walter that it could not have been unpleasant to sustain.

"We are not to ride away, at least, for some time, I am glad to hear," said he, in a tone meant for his *vis-à-vis*, though he looked at Lady Waywarden. "Middlesworth is a charming quarter for me, in every respect, and they'll leave us here in peace now till the spring."

“I suppose hunting is the great attraction,” said Lady Julia, demurely, loosing the while another shaft from her bow.

“*And* the shooting at Tollesdale,” added Walter, turning to his host, “*and* its inmates, *and* my own relations at Bridlemere. I’m a domestic person; I always was. Don’t you know, I’m a domestic person, Lady Waywarden?” he reiterated, appealing to the Countess.

“I confess, I shouldn’t have guessed it if you hadn’t told me,” answered her ladyship drily; whereon the eyes of Walter and Lady Julia met once more, and they both laughed.

It seemed as if there was some understanding between these young people; some interest in common; some link subtler and stronger than the mere acquaintance of London partnership or country neighbourhood; but it was hard to say. I need scarcely observe, that Walter was not demonstrative; and as for Lady Julia, I am sorry to admit that she was such a rattle, and such a flirt, you never knew what she was driving at.

Animal spirits have a great deal to answer for. The daughter inherited all her father’s health and vitality, with much of his joyous temperament,

and had besides continually before her eyes her mother's example to warn her from the opposite extreme of exaggerated coldness and reserve. Lady Julia's exterior, too, was in marked contrast to her disposition. Such beauty as she possessed was of the cold, clear, delicate order. Her features were very straight and regular; but the eyes, though bright as diamonds, were set too deep in her head; and though her mouth was very winning when she spoke, the lips closed tight over the white, even teeth, when she ceased, giving her whole countenance a cast of resolution—I had almost said defiance—more formidable than feminine. I have seen heads cut on cameos that resembled this young lady in every particular, and I think I have felt thankful that the type has become rarer now than it seems to have been of old. With her pale, clear skin (it was not freckled, though Mrs. Stoney said so, and though that sort of complexion generally is freckled), with her long, light eyelashes, her small, well-shaped head, and wealth of plaited hair, golden in the sun, rich chestnut by candle-light, and called red or auburn, according as people were or were not in love with her, she certainly did possess a

strange, weird, uncomfortable fascination of her own. There are some women with whom you fall in love, just as you fall asleep, easily, gradually, insensibly. The whole process is quite a pleasure, and the waking, as after a good night's rest, merely a question of time. There are others, again, who inflict on you nightmare rather than repose: whose image affords evil dreams, instead of healthy slumbers, and under whose influence your state is more that of a mesmeric trance than of sound, natural rest. You are never really happy during the whole time of the delusion: when you wake you are very miserable indeed. These last are to be avoided if a man wishes to remain a free agent, and, in my opinion, Lady Julia was one of them. She had a beautiful figure, though slight; nobody could deny that. She was formed more like a model than a living creature; and this advantage, of which she was perfectly aware, perhaps made her the graceful mover, dancer, and horsewoman she was. I am afraid she loved riding dearly; she could do it very well, you see, and was rather proud of being called "horsey," and "slangy," by old women of either sex. To see her cross the pavement before their

house in Circus Square, and kiss her favourite's nose, when she mounted or dismounted at the hottest hours of the day, was a sight, that if it suggested waste of affection, proved at the same time intense love for the animal and the exercise.

Even in the school-room Miss Prince was always afraid Lady Julia would be fast. "Not as feminine in her tastes as I could wish," was the way the governess worded her apprehensions, and they were justified by the result. She was fast, no doubt. Like her mother, she could be horribly fine when she chose, though it is only fair to say she seldom did choose in the country, or even in London, except on special occasions, and, so to speak, in self-defence. When they tilt in the *mêlée*, it is not to be expected that they should dispense with their plate-armour. She liked gaiety very much: balls, races, pic-nics, occasions for wearing handsome dresses, and flirting with handsome men. Nor is this an unusual tendency among the best and wisest of her sex, but I believe she was never really so happy as when riding a new horse, driving her wicked ponies, helping papa to break a retriever, or engaged in any other essentially masculine pursuit. It is a fact, that

when her brother Viscount Nethersole, low down in the fourth form at Eton, was at home for the holidays, she used to play cricket with him on the lawn, and could bowl, bat, and keep a wicket, so that young nobleman affirmed, "as well as any fellow in the Lower Shooting-fields Eleven."

Whether Walter had the slightest chance in an encounter with such a disposition, was a question he had asked himself more than once of late. Perhaps he had not answered it satisfactorily even now, while he sat opposite the brilliant, animated girl, and thought what an amusing companion she could be, and "what a well-bred one she was." You are not to suppose he was in love with her—that sort of thing is quite exploded now. Since the introduction of knickerbockers, I doubt if a man has ever been known to go down on his knees, and Lady Julia was the last person in the world to encourage, or even tolerate, anything in the shape of romance. But he certainly admired her. It was with a feeling of positive vexation that he bethought him, how, before he went away the day after to-morrow (he had to attend a dismounted parade at two o'clock), he would breakfast by

himself, without a chance of her company, which she might so easily afford him if she chose. He knew the ways of the house, and could recall one or two disappointments of the same nature. Lord Waywarden breakfasted in his writing-room, and a capital meal he made, at nine. Miss Prince consumed tea and toast in a spacious apartment, once a school-room, at half-past; Lady Julia had her chocolate in bed at eleven; and Lady Waywarden never showed till two or three o'clock in the afternoon. Breakfast went on for the guests from ten indefinitely; and nothing could be easier than for Lady Julia to come down and make Walter's tea, but well he knew she would do nothing of the kind.

She was a clever girl, and had enjoyed a good deal of practice in that sort of intercourse with young gentlemen, which, though of a warmer nature than friendship, stops short of positive flirtation. They never went further than she liked with her, or said to her more than she meant they should; and this immunity she owed partly to frankness of manner, natural or artificial; partly to fearless tactics and skill in defensive warfare. She had a reputation, too, for spirit, as well as

wit, and men did not care to provoke an encounter with a lady who was notorious for the facility with which she could "show you up," or "set you down." Of her own sex she had plenty of companions, but no friends; of the other, plenty of admirers, but no lovers. There are many of these exotic flowers grown in our aristocratic hothouses—flowers that are forced rather early into bloom, but are otherwise carefully reared and tended; of stately growth, and wondrous splendour; protected from the bee rather than the butterfly, and too often thrown away on an amateur, who has but to walk into the glasshouse, and select from it that which he desires. I sometimes think they are the better for transplanting, flourishing as brightly on a poorer soil and in a more exposed situation, losing nothing of their beauty, and gaining a perfume sweeter than before. Lady Julia used to say she should make a capital poor man's wife, whereat mamma lifted her white hands in horror, and Miss Prince her grizzled eyebrows in deprecation. Such jests were not encouraged in the family. Being an only daughter, she would have some money, and by a perversion of reasoning, less logical than natural, it seems established that



such young ladies are to fetch a higher price in the matrimonial market than others of the same fabric, equal in colouring and workmanship, but without the gilding. Lady Waywarden, however, obviously entertained no suspicions of Walter Brooke. Whether it was that the latter seemed, as befitted his profession, cuirass all over, and a warm admirer of no style of beauty but his own, or whether she was herself so utterly impenetrable, (for the Indian cousin, if he ever existed, had been forgotten long ago) as to disbelieve in the superstition of mutual attraction, or whether her ladyship's confidence arose from familiarity with her daughter's disposition, she certainly seemed to permit, if not to encourage, a state of things which any of her own sex would have termed "a strong flirtation with Walter Brooke."

Lady Julia, for her part, was nothing loth to keep her hand in, and seemed to practise on the present subject with even more than her usual zest. In vain mamma fitted on a taper white glove, to indicate sailing orders for the drawing-room. In vain Miss Prince made nervous little coughs, and took short dives at her smelling-bottle, and fidgeted uneasily to the extreme edge

of her seat—the tide of Lady Julia’s eloquence compelled them more than once to lower away their signals in despair.

Even Walter seemed to glow and brighten under the sunshiny glances of the syren. She asked him questions that denoted so much personal interest; she plied him so volubly with half good-humoured, half sarcastic remarks of a nature that she would herself have called “chaff;” so sparkled, as it were, and flashed at him, like a gem in a golden setting, that he could not but be pleased, though somewhat dazzled the while, at least for *him*, and not a little surprised.

“What sport had he yesterday? How late they must have left off! How many guns? and who were they? Plenty of ground game at Bridlemere” (what a pretty name!), “but not so many pheasants as papa, dear, *you* can show Mr. Brooke to-morrow. Oh! *she* knew! And was Mr. de Rolle there? What a shame to call him ‘Rags!’ Had seen him—was sure of it—the other day out with the Duke’s hounds—must have been Rags—rather admired him; his figure especially. And how did you get here, Mr. Brooke, and why were you so late?”

"I got here on Jack's pony," answered the hussar; "and I suppose I was late, because I started early, and galloped the whole way."

"If I had said so, you would have called it a woman's reason," observed Lady Julia, still ignoring mamma's signals, who had now finished buttoning on a very close-fitting and symmetrical glove. "But I rather pity the poor pony. Is it a very good animal? I think one of mine is the best in the world, and the other is better still. I am so fond of ponies! Tell me all about your brother's."

"My dear Julia," interrupted Lady Waywarden, whose patience was fairly exhausted, "Mr. Brooke will tell you all about the pony in the drawing-room." And her ladyship, gathering up fan, handkerchief, and smelling-bottle, rose in a cloud of drapery, and sailed stately, rippling and rustling as she went, to the door. Walter held it open, with a flourish, watching, it may be, for a responsive glance from Lady Julia as she went by, which, it is needless to observe, she did not vouchsafe to bestow.

My lord sank into an arm-chair by the fire, poured out a liberal glass of claret, pushed the

decanter to Walter; gulped, smacked his lips, spread a strong white hand to warm, and commenced a promising conversation by prophesying an open winter; and asking his guest, whether he had seen any sport yet, and had got together some horses he liked?

With such a preface, the dialogue was pretty sure to proceed swimmingly. Every man is pleased to talk about his horses, whatever be the number or nature of his stud; and Lord Waywarden was a good listener on any topic, by the side of a blazing fire, and with such excellent claret as his own to keep the subject from getting dry. "He had been young himself," he was fond of observing; and he might have added that for enjoyment of to-day and thoughtlessness of to-morrow, he had been very young indeed. Whilst he had nothing, his lordship had been one of the fastest of the fast. He bought, no doubt, a good deal of experience and dealing with the Jews, as Lord Nethersole, bought it of course at a high percentage on cost price. The Earl, however, had the good sense to use the wisdom the Viscount purchased, and it must have been a very sharp Jew indeed who could get to windward of Way-

warden now ; yet it never seemed to occur to him that his old friend's second son ought hardly to give three figures for his horses, and have so many in the stable.

Not that he would have wittingly encouraged him in any hurtful extravagance, but that it was one of those matters men in his position seem to ignore ; none more so than those who have known difficulties in their youth, and got out of them either by good fortune or good abilities. Perhaps they think others must be able to do the same, and, recognising only the successful ventures, forget the number of barks that have been met in stress of weather on the voyage, and never come into port at all. Be this how it may, it seems that a young man need only show an inclination to go a fair pace *down the road*, and all his friends are eager to encourage and assist him on the way.

By the time Walter had finished his bottle of claret, and corrected everything with half a glass of old sherry, the world seemed a good one to live in, and an easy one to get on with. As he flung his napkin into his chair, and swaggered off to the drawing-room, pulling his moustache, he had no

difficulty in stopping certain misgivings as to ways and means which had oppressed him not a little, on an empty stomach, during the process of dressing for dinner.

The invention of the pianoforte must have done incalculable service in the way of reducing the nobler sex to subjection. For a woman who does *not* sing, I can conceive no auxiliary so versatile, and at the same time so effective. She can work on your feelings with the treble ; she can drown your remonstrance with the bass ; she can conceal the very words you see trembling on her lips with a grand crash of both hands at once, dying away presently into a wail of low melodious chords, that draw your very heart out through your long, foolish, thrilling ears. Then her attitude at the instrument is in itself so graceful, the turn of her hands and arms over the keys so attractive, and the upward look she steals at her prey so irresistible, that the charm is completed long before the *fantasia* is finished. The listener gasps, and yields without an effort at self-preservation. The net is spread, the noose adjusted, resistance is hopeless, and escape impossible.

It must have been pleasant to lean over Lady

Julia, to listen to her playing, which was good; and watch her profile, which was better; and catch, ever and anon, the sparkle of those diamond eyes, which was best of all. Coffee came and went. Curaçoa and tea were offered, and declined. Lady Waywarden wrote sheet after sheet to some other corresponding countess, for whom she cared as little as possible in her heart. Miss Prince worked a counterpane of formidable dimensions, with a hook-nosed ivory instrument, in short angry notches, and watched the while for Lord Waywarden's tea-cup, balanced insecurely on that nobleman's knee, who had sunk, as usual, into a sound, healthy, and somewhat noisy slumber. Walter was treated without ceremony (not that the Earl could keep awake after dinner for any guest in the world; so that when the Duchess of Merthyr-Tydvil, who was a prodigious favourite, staid at Tollesdale, he used to take his repose in jerks and snatches, standing with his back to the fire); but Lady Julia alone seemed to devote herself to the young man's amusement, and very successful, it is but fair to say, she was.

By the time he had drawn a low easy-chair to the pianoforte, and seated himself in close prox-

imity to her music-stool, their conversation had gradually sobered down from the bantering to the confidential. Though she played at intervals (remarkably well), and kept up, indeed, a semblance of music throughout, they talked upon a variety of subjects, interesting and indifferent, but all leading to one termination, viz., the state of things at Bridlemere. The farm, the shooting, the Squire's health, Helen's pursuits, "your charming sister Helen, Mr. Brooke;" even brother Jack, his pony and terrier, were discussed in turn, and it was hard to say on which Lady Julia seemed to dwell with the most pleasure. By the time Lady Waywarden finished her letter, Miss Prince saved the tea-cup, and my lord awoke himself with a vigorous snore, Walter began to think that he had at last succeeded in making some real progress with the daughter of the house. It was now long past midnight, and they used to fancy that they were rather early people than otherwise at Tollesdale. Poor Miss Prince could scarcely keep awake, and swallowed a yawn in the very act of wishing everybody good-night; but Lady Julia's eyes sparkled brighter than ever, while Walter lit her candle; and even in the hall, when he



turned to watch her up the wide staircase, branching off midway in the direction of her own and her mother's apartments, she flashed back at him one more of those deadly arrows that, like the Parthian's, are so fatal when thus delivered over the shoulder. More, he heard her voice die away along the corridor above, humming the air she had been playing which he had most enthusiastically admired.

Walter returned to his host, and drank a glass of fair water, receiving at the same time directions as to where he should find a certain smoking-room, recently built, and fitted up expressly for the enjoyment of that deleterious luxury. But his host excused himself from joining him. "He was confoundedly sleepy," he said, "so should be off at once without ceremony to perch." And Walter, reflecting that it was getting late, and he would like to shoot his straightest to-morrow, followed my lord's example, and was soon well over the border, and far into the Land of Shadows, where mankind pass nearly a third of their lives.



## CHAPTER VI.

JACK BROOKE.

**I**T was a lovely night, for all that the month was November, in the park at Bridlemere. A light haze hung over the saturated earth, and through its film the moonlight glimmered in ghostly whitened rays. The stems of the old trees loomed huge, fantastic, and ill-defined, like objects in a dream. Where the ground rose but by a few feet, patches of bare russet sward, and brown bending fern, and here a clump of brushwood, and there a twisted, stunted thorn, emerged like islands from the surface of a milky sea ; but on a lower level, more especially down towards the lodges, and in a part of the park called Dingle-side, the heavy vapours rolled and curdled, wreathing themselves into

strange curves and shapes that, waving in and out between the trees, a vivid fancy might well conjure into phantoms of the night.

A heavy dew had fallen, moistening and thickening the clinging herbage, so as to deaden the footsteps of the only passer-by at this late and lonely hour; footsteps, I am sorry to say, that left an exceedingly wavering and devious track behind them, denoting want of harmony between the volition and execution of the belated traveller.

It was but our friend Jem Batters, finding his way home from the public-houses of Middlesworth, to his mother's cottage, across Bridlemere Park. Jem Batters walking himself sober, though by no means yet arrived at that desirable condition, and hovering between the imaginative state produced by combining beer with alcohol, and the nervous prostration consequent on such a mixture when its fumes have evaporated. After to-night Jem had resolved he would turn over a new leaf. He had been "wetting his luck," as he called it, for the last time. To-morrow he was promised employment in the brewery, and henceforth he would become sober and steady, and save his money as

well as his nerve and muscle ; for Jem had found, to his dismay, that these two last were beginning somewhat to fail from the effects of dissipation. Thus it always was with this unfortunate rustic. Every new phase of life was inaugurated with a debauch that riveted his fetters faster on him than before. Well might his old mother declare, "It was the drink as done it. Wuss than pison ! Keep our Jem from the drink, an' there ar'n't his equal, not in the parish, there ar'n't—either for work *or* play !"

"Our Jem" lurched up against one of the old elms, and, setting his back to it, gazed down a vista towards the Manor House with drunken gravity, shaking his head as he espied a light twinkling from an upper window in the vague grey mass. Jem's thoughts were running riot apace, and he was speculating wildly on the inmates of that mansion, their pursuits, their habits, and their position, which he had been brought up to regard with a veneration such as we pay to royalty—his fancies following each other something in this fashion :

How pleasant to be a gentleman ! Not a gentleman in trade, like his future employers

Stoney Brothers; nor a soldier gentleman, forced to do as he is bid, getting wages just like a working man, and expected to fight into the bargain; but a real gentleman, like our old Squire, with nothing to do and plenty to drink, and time upon his hands the whole day long. Then he remembered that our old Squire had not been seen at farm or garden; had not been outside the house now for a weary while; that the labourers whispered to each other how his time was nearly come; that one-half of him was as good as dead already; and Jem felt an instinctive shudder creep from head to heel while he shrank from the conviction that not only the old Squire, but he himself, and "mother," in the chimney-corner at home, and the boon companions whom he left still carousing at the "Fox and Fiddler," were subject to the common lot. He would drive away such thoughts though, with beer and brandy, he reflected, if he were a gentleman. If he were Mr. John, for instance. Ah! that was the man he would like to change places with! Mr. John, so frank, so bold, so stout and hearty, such a pleasant-spoken gentleman too, with every girl in the parish talking of his ruddy cheek, his

brown locks, his white teeth, and his ready smile. Jem pictured to himself "Mr. John" at this moment, sitting at the head of his father's table, surrounded by his guests, the land-steward, the tax-gatherer, the new tenant at the Mere Farm, and perhaps one or two of the parish church-wardens, waited on by grooms, game-keepers, the under-gardener, and all the servants in the house; drinking port wine out of tumblers, and singing hunting songs alternately with Miss Helen's music, who is playing the piano to the party, with a gold necklace on, and flowers in her hair. Ah! it must be a jolly life, that must! He didn't think much of Miss Helen, though. She wasn't plump and likely looking, what he called; though some folks made a great to-do about her slim waist and her cream-coloured face, with its black eyes. To his mind, now, Cissy Brown or Sue Stanion, were either of 'em a better sort; more what he should call *his choice*, you know.

But dear! if he was a gentleman, he wouldn't trouble much about the women-folk! Not in his present mood at least. Give him a good horse, and rabbiting every day, as much as he liked, and plenty to drink when he came in, and he

wouldn't ask for more. He'd be as happy as a king, he would! Keep the game up too, as well as e'er a gentleman of them all. Ah! that *would* be prime! "You wheezy old beggar, you frightened me, you did!"

Jem gave a violent start, that denoted a good deal more nervousness than is usual with the healthy system of an out-of-door labourer, and that probably frightened the asthmatic sheep whose cough thus broke in on the thread of his reflections, quite as much as that gasping animal, lying in the driest part of the gravelled carriage road, had frightened him. Under its sobering influence, however, he woke from the dream in which he had been immersed, and made his way more steadily over the Park in the direction of his home. Thither it is not my present intention to follow him. I would rather climb up one of those long flickering rays to that window high in the lofty building, and enter the chamber of the only inmate still awake, an hour and more after midnight, in the house of Bridlemere.

An odour of strong tobacco fills the apartment, wreathing itself about the walls and furniture as gracefully, and in far heavier volumes,

than does the mist about the trees and shrubs outside. Clearing sluggishly at intervals, it discloses a short, *very* short pipe, such an instrument as French soldiers appropriately call a "*brûle-gueule*," blackened with unremitting use, and held firmly between two rows of remarkably strong, white, and even teeth. Jack Brooke's mouth is like his brother Walter's, only, being clean shaven, the family lines of resolution around its lips are more apparent on the face of the elder son. This face is brown, ruddy and healthful, not regular of features, and far inferior in beauty to that of the handsome Hussar, but with an honest, hearty expression, and a kindliness in the eyes sufficiently engaging. Perhaps it is only their long lashes that impart to these a depth and softness almost womanly. Certainly, there is benevolence, goodwill, and a gentle, protective tenderness in their glance.

It is a face that most people would call comely, but heavy. Those who look below the surface, and are accustomed to study character from slight indications, would detect a sensitive nature under this rough exterior, would observe signs of warm affections, a high standard of good, and a generous



confidence in others, mingled with the diffidence and self-depreciation which spring from an imaginative temperament, suppressed and restrained by force of circumstances, combined with a keen sense of the ridiculous.

The fancy that is easily moved to laughter is also somewhat susceptible of tears. A man of common sense, ashamed to own his tendency to such weak emotions, cloaks them under brevity of speech, rough carelessness of manner, and an appearance of confirmed insensibility, transparent enough to those who are in the habit of penetrating the affectations of their kind. It is your glib, plausible, well-spoken personage, generally voluble, always indifferent, and habitually polite, whose heart is as hard as the nether millstone. Abruptness of speech, hesitation in offering and accepting conventional courtesies, reserve with strangers, and diffidence amongst women, these drawbacks to social success are often the very offspring of generous feelings and a high tone of mind. It is a calumny to say that shyness arises from conceit. It is more generally the result of respect for others as well as self; and, though the example be rare as it is ridiculous, a man who is

capable of blushing after his whiskers are grown, is usually a good fellow at bottom, and as honest as the day is long.

Jack Brooke was sadly given to this absurdity. Many a lady accosting Mr. Brooke across the dinner-table, had marvelled to note how her simple remark brought the blood to his cheek; marvelled, perhaps, still more to find no further result from his confusion. He was frightened at ladies, and that is the truth. "What he thought they would do to him," as Walter used to say, "was a mystery." But though Jack was as bold a fellow as ever stepped, under circumstances of physical danger, he was routed, so to speak, and put to flight with great slaughter, by the society of a Miss in her teens.

His character was not very easy to penetrate. I doubt if any one knew him thoroughly. Certainly not his father, nor his brother Walter, nor even Helen, though on occasion she was the only person in whom he would confide. "Tatters," a certain ragged terrier of eccentric habits, inseparable from his master, seemed more familiar with his thoughts and opinions than any other inmate of the house. It speaks well for Jack that the

dog loved him with a devotion utterly ludicrous and canine. The domestics in general liked the younger brother best. Walter gave them far more trouble, domineered, hectorcd, blew up, always in his own off-hand princely way, and they "came to heel," as it were, and fawned upon him, as human nature will, when consistently and judiciously bullied. He was free, too, with his money, and enjoyed, besides, the *prestige* of his profession, his *moustaches*, and occasional appearance in undress uniform, a costume which the female part of the establishment—from the old housekeeper, already a middle-aged person when he was weaned, down to the under kitchen-maid, lately promoted from the Sunday school to the scullery—declared, one and all, "became Master Walter wonderful !"

Jack's pursuits may be gathered from the furniture and accessories of this, his own peculiar snugery, far removed from the inhabited regions of the mansion, where he spends many a solitary hour undisturbed, and where he can smoke his strong tobacco in peace, without polluting the atmosphere for every other member of the establishment.

His literary tastes seem simple enough, and of a practical rather than a speculative nature. A heavy work on agriculture, with elaborate diagrams of ploughs, turnip-cutters, and such mechanical auxiliaries to husbandry, stands in the place of honour on the row of shelves which constitute his library. It is supported by a few odd numbers of the *Sporting Magazine*, a periodical in which he takes great delight ; by two or three fly-books, stuffed with crafty entomological imitations, tied by Jack's own strong, supple fingers ; and a thick quarto edition of "Spenser's Faëry Queen," a work into which, as into a stiff fertile soil, you may dig, and dig again, reaping in proportion to your labour crop after crop in swift succession, of free, golden, and abundant harvests.

In decoration, the chamber has but little to boast. Originally a servant's room, very near the roof ; its walls are simply whitewashed ; its one window is bare of blind or curtain. There is a carpet trodden into shreds by Jack's nailed shooting-boots, and there is a high-backed leathern chair, in the depths of which Tatters lies curled up and motionless, but opening an eye occasionally to make sure his master is still poring over a

red-covered, interlined account-book at the writing-table. Propped against the inkstand is a photograph from a picture in one of the drawing-rooms, and when Jack's eye travels from his work it rests sadly and rather longingly on the photograph. At such moments Tatters bestows an affectionate wink on his master.

The photograph represents a handsome, prosperous-looking woman, with Helen Brooke's cast of features, and a countenance which, although very different in character, has a strong physical resemblance to the girl's—a face that, with energy to sustain its burdens, and good-humour to lighten its crosses, seems designed thoroughly to enjoy the pleasures as well as to fulfil the duties of life, not to be cut off after eight-and-forty hours of illness before it had reached its prime. Jack remembers her well. To this day, when he thinks of his mother, his heart tightens with the old pain that was so unbearable at first. For years the child, and afterwards the schoolboy, would wake up and weep in silence, longing, yearning for the dear lost face, to his mind the fondest and fairest he had ever seen.

Being the eldest, Jack remembered her far

better than the rest. She died, indeed, when Helen was yet little more than an infant; but her first-born was her constant playmate and companion, the pride of her young wifehood, and the darling of her maternal heart. "Mother," says a great writer, who has lately gone from among us, "is the name for God with little children;" and there is indeed no earthly worship at once so pure, so trusting, and so engrossing as that which is offered to her by the innocent loving heart to which she is the embodiment of beauty, affection, and power. When Mrs. Brooke died, the Squire, as the servants said, "took on dreadful;" but he got over her loss long before his quiet, undemonstrative little son. Ruth, the upper housemaid, since married, somewhat hurriedly, to a blacksmith, and gone to Australia, found the child, months afterwards, squeezing his poor little face against the railings of the churchyard where his mamma was buried, "crying," as that soft-hearted damsel described it, "poor dear, quite softlike and patient; and indeed if my 'art 'ad been a *stone*, it must have giv to the darling then and there!" So she carried Master John back again every yard of the way, an honest mile and more,

in her bosom, mingling her tears with his from pure sympathy and compassion, foregoing altogether the junketing to which she was bound with her blacksmith, and thereby deferring, if not imperilling the whole scheme of her nuptials and subsequent emigration. Jack was right to mourn for his mother. He had been somewhat lonely in the world ever since she left him. Whether the child's nature became repressed and blighted, as it were, by so deep an affliction endured so early, or that, lavishing so much love on mamma, it had the less to spare for any one else : certain it is that the eldest boy stood a little aloof from brother and sister, nay, even from his father himself, and appeared, unlike other children, to lead his own life apart, and follow out his own train of thoughts and fancies uninfluenced by the companionship of those with whom he lived.

He was no recluse though, far from it. At school, where he took a leading part in foot-ball and cricket matches ; at college, where he remained long enough to be plucked for that preliminary examination which is called "The Little Go," and whence he departed sorrowful and humiliated rather than surprised, Jack Brooke

was unquestionably a favourite. Returning to Bridlemere, he mingled cordially in the sports and gatherings of the county; but at the latter he could scarce be said to enjoy himself; whilst of the former he seemed most to relish those which are best pursued alone. There was not such a fly-fisher as Jack in the Midland Counties. To circumvent ducks by moonlight, flushing the wary wild-fowl just *within* range, and securing the effect of both barrels, was a talent he possessed in common with a select few of his fellow-creatures, and the exercise of which afforded him an intense and inexplicable delight; but to walk up partridges in line, or to stand at covert-ends, and knock down cock-pheasants by the dozen, offered him neither pleasure nor excitement. In *the sport par excellence*, the spirit-stirring, the joyous, the unrivalled, the very thought of which recalls a golden vision of those mild November mornings, with their dewy pastures, their fragrant copses, and their deep, still woodlands, faintly blushing yet from autumn's farewell kiss; of manly cheer, and kindly greeting, and white and scarlet, and tramp of hoof, and ring of bridle; of the horse's generous daring, and the dash and mettle of the hound; of



the heart-beating moments ere suspense thrills into certainty; of the maddening rally for a start, and the quieter, steadier, more continuous energy of the chase—in *the* sport of sports, I say, no man was a deeper proficient than Jack Brooke. Yet he enjoyed it very rarely now, for reasons which will appear hereafter. He could ride, too, better than the generality of sportsmen. Strongly built, and of considerable weight, he cherished, nevertheless, a taste for keeping in the front rank, which was neither to be baulked by magnitude of obstacle nor inferiority of horse-flesh. The youngest and wildest reprobate was easy and tractable in his hands: sitting quite still and unflurried, he seemed to impart his own cool energy to his horse. The animal soon enters into the joke, and enjoys it as much as his rider. I do not aim at giving Jack more credit than he deserves for success in a mere pastime. I only wish you to infer that he possessed both courage and temper, a combination of qualities which help a man over the metaphorical ups and downs of life as smoothly as across a flying country, with a pack of fox-hounds running hard.

In general society, our friend was, perhaps, not

quite so forward. In the ball-room, I fear, he sat motionless as in the saddle; and at picnics, or archery meetings, proved simply a dead weight and encumbrance. He was not even a good listener, and when tackled by an old, or even a young lady, without means of escape, afforded a piteous and distressing spectacle. Elderly gentlemen had a high opinion of him, notwithstanding. They considered him, "A sensible young man that: none of your talking chaps, sir; but a fellow that's not above taking a hint. No conceit, sir: not ashamed to be taught." And indeed he would suffer the platitudes of his seniors meekly, and with a patience the less meritorious, perhaps, that he permitted his attention to wander sadly during its progress, and went his way totally uninfluenced by the lecture at its close.

The women, I fear, compared him unfavourably with his younger brother. Of Walter's dandyism, *insouciance* and charming conceit he had not one *iota*. These qualities, like ribbons, laces, and such garnishing, command high prices in the female market. The stouter calico and flannel virtues, so to speak, fetch but a few coppers per yard. A handsome face and a pair of broad shoulders can-

not hold their own against varnish and vanity combined; nor are the homely merits which constitute a good husband and *père de famille* of the kind much relished in a dancing partner. Here and there, a very fine lady who was a little tired of everybody, or a very fast one who wanted to strike out a new line, might think it worth while to cultivate Jack Brooke; but each invariably gave him up in despair after half a dozen sentences. No woman, however fast or fine, likes to be assured by a man's manner that he is hopelessly uninterested in herself, her bonnet, her conversation, and her opinions. The slightest spark of intelligence, the shortest monosyllable thrown in at intervals, will keep her tongue going, with small exertion on a listener's part; but the intelligence and the interest must at least be simulated, otherwise she votes you, "Oh! so heavy!" and flutters off to fasten on other game, with which she hopes to have better sport.

I fear most of the young ladies about Middlesworth would have passed upon Jack Brooke the sweeping condemnation that he was "absent and stupid, and always seemed to be thinking of something else!" He *had* a good deal to think

of. He was busied with no pleasant thoughts now, poring over those ruled pages, and emitting tobacco-smoke in pungent clouds that caused poor Tatters to sneeze disgusted from the depths of his arm-chair. Jack was fond of farming. Jack was a practical farmer. Jack could not bear to see things going wrong, and business mismanaged, and money wasted where money was becoming scarcer every day. His taste for agriculture he inherited from the Squire: not so his love of order, method, and a liberal economy. The father, like many indolent people, delighted in being robbed—like most obstinate natures, was penny-wise and pound-foolish. Since the latter's illness, Jack was supposed to take much of the trouble off his hands in looking after the Home Farm, and managed the estate, subject to the supervision of the jealous, exacting, and utterly unreasonable invalid. In vain the son plodded, and laboured, and pondered, tramping about the acres by day, and racking his brains over the red account-book by night: some whim of the father was sure to nullify his happiest suggestions; and, exert himself as he would, he was, after all, but a man in fetters, liable at any moment to be

tripped up, and get a sore tumble besides. Being, as I say, of a practical nature, he could not but perceive the proportion in which expenditure exceeded income; and this, too, gave him the uneasiness felt by every prudent person in like straits. To reduce the outlay on his own responsibility was impossible, and an expostulation with the Squire only brought on a good deal of intemperate language and an amount of excitement very hurtful to the latter in his feeble state. At first, he tried to get Walter to interest himself in business matters, feeling that if any one's advice could bias his father it would be that of the favourite son. This conviction was not pleasant for the elder brother; but he worked upon it nevertheless with considerable energy and complete failure. The hussar could not bring himself to take the slightest interest in "grubbing about in the dirt," as he profanely termed the first and most essential of sciences. There was something of the Squire's indolence and carelessness of consequences in Walter which, perhaps, endeared him to his father as much as his personal good looks and the easy assumption of his manners both at home and abroad. Once, and for a few

moments, Jack bethought him of enlisting Helen in the cause; but when he remembered her constant attendance on the invalid, his dependence on her for society, and the many hours they spent together alone, he refrained from adding more weight to the burden already sufficiently heavy which his sister carried so uncomplainingly. Altogether, Jack was not happy. He kept his cares to himself though, never even hinted at them to the others, and, night after night, pored over the red account-book, with a sickening heart indeed, but an honest stedfastness of purpose and determination to do the best he could.

Self-sacrifice is one of the most beautiful of virtues. It speaks well for our fellow-creatures, that they give us so many opportunities of cultivating it. If you choose, like Sir Walter Raleigh, to take the clothes off your back, and spread them in the mire to be trodden on, innumerable muddy feet pass over willingly enough, stamping them into shreds, and even spurning your garments the while, because they are not of the richest material and the newest fashion. When you give a shoeless beggar the shilling which, perhaps, you cannot very well spare, with which you meant to have

procured your early dinner, or taken your child to the Zoological, or bought the tobacco that is your only luxury, how do you know he does not curse you because it is not half-a-crown?

Being paid in gratitude is, after all, very embarrassing. It can seldom be gracefully tendered, more seldom gracefully accepted. If a man owes me five shillings, it is inconvenient both for him and me that he should liquidate his debt in copper, and I can imagine many circumstances in which I had rather not be reimbursed at all. Perhaps it is only fair that benefits should usually be welcomed with small thanks, and hardly ever be requited in kind. Even without the reversion thus purchased for the donor, the pleasure of conferring them is a very sufficient return; and while it is more blessed, most people will allow that it is also far more agreeable to *give* than to *receive*.

A story of Jack's school-days perhaps illustrates his character better than whole pages of analysis. His younger brother was not only more advanced in learning, but took the lead from the elder in the playground as well. Not that he was as strong and active, as good at cricket or football, but that the self-reliance of his character imposed upon his

comrades here, as subsequently on general society in the real world. It is but justice to allow this, however, that in ability at lessons he was far superior to Jack. The latter succumbed cheerfully. His honest face would glow with delight when Walter was "commended" in Cornelius, or made a stunning catch at "long-slip." There was no jealousy in Brooke, senior; and as for his generosity and goodnature, to use the boys' own expression, "There was not such a kid in the school!" Didn't he spend his pocket-money, treating the other fellows, almost before he got it? And hadn't he given Pinkes his ferret, the treasure most coveted in the whole society? white, vindictive, with red eyes, and far gone in the family-way, to console that mourner for the loss of his great-uncle, an old gentleman for whom Pinkes entertained a morbid terror and aversion, and on whose demise, I fear, that young dunce looked as a happy interposition, for that he would examine him in his humanities no more.

It was the custom in this, as in many other academies, to celebrate the Fifth of November with great glare and ceremony. The boys subscribed for fireworks; the ushers begged and bought faggots;



a neighbouring farmer, known to the young gentlemen by the simple appellation of "Nobs," provided a tar-barrel, while the master contributed a half-holiday and his sanction to the proceedings. Then they yelled and shouted to their hearts' content, dancing and leaping like young savages, round the bonfire; and by degrees, the dun smoke, studded with sparks, rolled heavily away, the flames streamed up into a shifting, flickering pyramid of fire; the Roman-candles shot their luminous bullets into air, the rockets soared heavenward in glowing tracks, and fell again in showers of green and crimson and gold; squibs and crackers hissed and bounded about like fiery adders; Catherine-wheels, revolving faster and faster, like illuminated kaleidoscopes, wheeled into one dazzling, stupefying, yellow blaze of glory; and then the lustre faded, the skeleton frame-work showed, the bonfire sank, the tar-barrel emitted a last feeble flash, the whole thing went out like a candle, and darkness was once more upon the earth.

During the height of the revels, however, it came to pass, that the spirit of mischief, never dormant in a schoolboy, prompted Walter Brooke to put a lighted cracker into the tail-pocket of Mr.

Softly, the writing-master. That professor, unfortunately, carried other combustible preparations in the same receptacle. The result was, a protracted and continuous explosion, inconvenient, ludicrous, and not devoid of danger. It was some moments ere the sufferer knew exactly what had happened; and during that interval, Pinkes, the boy already mentioned, being of an excitable and impressionable temperament, moved besides by feelings of terror, mixed with considerable admiration, could not forbear exclaiming, "Oh! Brooke." The professor, a married man with a family, naturally resenting an attempt to blow him into the air as an extempore Guy Fawkes, caught the name instantly, and did not fail to make his complaint, nor to show his scorched and ruined garment to the master. Short and summary is the justice of the rod. After school next morning, Jack must stand forth, face to face with the avenger. He marched up sturdily to the desk, with cold hands and a beating heart. Stern, measured, incisive, came the accents off the lips of that immovable Fate, over its high starched neck-cloth.

"An outrage, flagrant, vindictive, and unparal-

leled—not only subversive of discipline in the school, but a gross offence to society at large, and a crime provided against by the laws of the land. What is the meaning of it? I ask you, Brooke, what is the meaning of it?”

“Please, sir, I didn’t do it,” said the poor little man, in a low voice, which rang nevertheless in his own ears like a trumpet.

“Please, sir, you didn’t do it!” sneered the Fate. “Lie the first, sir—obvious, palpable, and supererogatory. Then please, sir, who did do it?”

“Please, sir, I don’t know,” answered the boy, more courageously this time, for his pluck rose as the danger drew near, and he felt, that though he was telling a lie now, it was one which stamped him a hero and a martyr in the dozen or two of opinions that constituted his little world.

“You don’t know, sir!” repeated the cruel voice, jubilant now, yet repressed, in conscious power. “Then we must *make* you know, sir, and teach you to know better another time. Mr. Marks, the boys will attend for punishment.”

Mr. Marks was the usher. The boys *did* attend for punishment, and Jack Brooke felt for the rest of the day as if he was standing in the

thinnest continuations, with his back to a kitchen fire.

Jack shuts up the account-book at last, with a puzzled, weary expression, and doubts whether he won't have one more pipe before turning in. Tatters leaps exulting to the floor, and wags his tail for permission to take his usual place on the quilt. His master pulls off his old worn shooting-jacket with a yawn, and proceeds leisurely to undress. Stripping, one by one, the garments from his fine athletic frame, something of discontent stirs within him at the thralldom and constraint in which he lives. Willingly, thinks Jack, would he change places with any day-labourer about the place. He could work at least as hard and patiently as his fellows, for the benefit of those he loves. He would be in no false position then; he would escape from the perpetual dissatisfaction with the present, the constant misgivings for the future. He would feel no inferiority amongst his comrades, those honest hard-handed rustics, with whom strength and manhood are the only tangible qualities, and intellectual power entirely an unknown quantity. He could not be further removed than he is now from all that he wishes

to become; and perhaps he might be better appreciated by those who were dependent on his exertions for their bread. Yes, he would walk out cheerfully at sunrise, to earn his day's wages by his day's work, so that his father and Walter, and even Helen, and perhaps one or two others, might learn the stuff he was made of. "Bosh! it's two o'clock in the morning," says Jack, out loud. "or I never should be such an ass as to get into this morbid strain. Hie up! Tatters. Good-night, you beauty!" And he pauses, with the extinguisher in his hand, before putting out the candle, and turning in finally for his rest.

"You beauty!" I must observe, was not addressed to Tatters, whose claims to that appellation would have borne considerable argument. It applied to a tawdry French print, which hung within sight of his pillow, and for which Jack cherished an admiration, unaccountable to the most intimate and confidential of his friends.

This work of art represented an impossible lady on an impossible horse, with an impossible hawk on her wrist, and an impossible hound at her stirrup. She wore the tightest of waists, the fullest

of skirts, the most exaggerated of hats, and the most undisciplined of feathers. Her horse, sustained to all appearance by atmospheric pressure alone, danced and curvetted airily on one leg, obviously without coercion from his rider, for the rein floated loose in her lap, and her tiny riding-whip was carried by the hound in its mouth. Clouds of dust constituted the background of this suggestive composition ; and the only merit in the whole appeared to be the ingenuity with which the artist had combined so much levity of expression with such classic regularity of features. There was something in the face, too, that drew attention ; a certain depth of tenderness in the eyes—a certain saucy resolution about the mouth, attractive because so contradictory, without being entirely irreconcilable. The French print was like a French novel—ludicrous, exaggerated, unnatural, yet possessing a peculiar interest and fascination of its own.

Jack bought it in Paris, to which city he had been prevailed on to accompany Walter for a ten days' trip ; the elder brother, I fear, furnishing the means out of his slender store. Walter used to make his father laugh with an imaginary descrip-

tion of its purchase. Jack's French, his blushes, and general confusion, while he explained to the smiling shopwoman which print he wanted, that voluble lady's coquetry and sly allusions, with the eventual discomfiture of the Englishman, and his departure in possession of the article at double its marked price. I say, imaginary, for the brothers were seldom together, except at dinner, in the gay city; and though Jack suffered from a fine chivalrous shyness amongst women, he had also a business-like, quick-sighted, kind of common sense, that would detect and resist imposition from the most delusive dame who ever smiled across a counter.

Whatever he paid for the print, however, he seemed to value it very high. There it hung in the place of honour opposite his bed-head. His last look at night, his first in the morning, could scarce help resting on the winning eyes, and the saucy determined mouth. Pleasant dreams! honest Jack, and sound sleep! unbroken by the snores of Tatters, lying warm and cosy, coiled up on the quilt at your feet.



## CHAPTER VII.

### A DRAGON'S TOOTH.

**W**HEN Miss Brooke went out walking, she was not above the little coquetries of outward adornment practised by her sex. Dangerous, as young ladies can be, in the full lustre of candle-light, glowing, so to speak, in their war-paint, whirling their scalps and other trophies in the war-dance, and fully caparisoned at all points for the war-path, I think even the most formidable, to carry on the metaphor, looks more like "raisin' har'," when she sallies forth towards sundown, lithe, looped-up, and lightly accoutred either for flight or battle; to all appearance unexpectant, yet at the same time not incapable, of "following up a trail" (for the female nature is seldom quite unprepared to take



a prey) ; and, conscious that her forces have been recruited by luncheon, while her weapons are brightened by the becoming influence of the evening breeze, equal to either emergency, the extension of a merciful prerogative, or the infliction of immediate death.

Leaning over a stile, and gazing down into the valley on the town of Middlesworth, a very well-dressed and rather showy-looking man smoked his cigar, apparently wrapped in deep meditation. The sound of Helen's step woke him from his abstraction, and the undisguised approval with which he stared at her as she approached was only excusable on the plea that it was months since he had seen anything in the shape of a young lady so entirely to his taste. Miss Brooke *did* look very handsome, as she came along a dry, sound path that crossed the well-drained field.

Her delicate cheek had caught a tinge of colour from the soft west wind, that lifted the heavy trails of black hair off her temples. The small well-shaped head, with its clear-cut features, was borne royally as usual ; but with a jaunty carriage that sprang from the elastic step and free graceful gestures of a perfect symmetry. Her

lips were parted, as though she drank in with zest the pure autumnal air, and her eyes sparkled with the light of health and animation. A dark woman with a colour has all her attractions increased tenfold. In repose she is very generally pale; she rides at anchor, as one may say, under the white flag—calm, stately, and peaceful; but when she shakes out her canvas and hoists the red ensign, not another craft that walks the waters need hope to take the wind out of her sails. Helen thought as little of her looks as any young woman who possessed a glass on her toilet-table; yet she must have *felt* beautiful, as she stepped lightly along, enjoying thoroughly the exercise, the landscape, and even the solitude, so pleasant after a whole morning spent in the library, listening to the Squire's everlasting surmises and wearisome complaints.

The man with the cigar took a thorough inventory of her as she came on. He noted the turn of her tall round figure, set off by a close-fitting jacket, and a full fluted skirt, looped up over the striped stuff petticoat, with a rim of worked white edging underneath. He glanced admiringly at the slender, hollow feet, with their arched in.

steps, cased in supple, shining little boots, laced, soled, pieced, and strapped, in ridiculous imitation of those ponderous articles he wore himself on the heather or the stubbles. He was pleased to see, though it could not much matter to *him*, that over the straight trim ankles the bright-coloured hose clung close without a wrinkle; that the dark kid gloves fitted the taper hands without a crease. Nothing escaped him—not the heavy links of a gold bracelet at her wrist, nor the delicate lace-edged handkerchief peeping from her jacket pocket, nor the neat umbrella, much too small for use, that if once opened could surely never be folded so smooth again, nor even the heart-shaped locket, with poor papa's hair in it, that hung on a velvet ribbon round Helen's white neck.

All this, I say, he saw, as she drew nearer—and she came on pretty fast, I can tell you—nor seeing this could he repress a covert smile, a smile under the skin, that flitted over the man's face, and did by no means improve its expression.

He made way for her as she approached the stile, and removed the cigar from his lips. There is something in the presence of a *real* lady to which the lowest bred man cannot but pay an

unwilling, almost an unconscious deference ; and this was not a low-bred man, far from it. He had been much more in society, and probably knew a great many more smart people than Helen ; yet, taking the two as class specimens, a child would not have hesitated in pointing out the aristocrat, and the plebeian.

He was a good-looking fellow too, and not in what could fairly be called a flash or vulgar style. Helen did not look at him, be sure, but she saw him nevertheless, and took in his general appearance, as young ladies can, at a glance, with her own eyes averted all the time. She observed that he had heavy, well-shaped features, small dark eyes and large dark whiskers, a coarse mouth, very good teeth, a great deal of jewellery, and a remarkably bright colour ; that his clothes were perfectly well-made (you must remember Helen had two brothers, one of them a dandy by profession), and though in no way remarkable, were of a fashion and material more adapted for town than country wear. She could not but admit that his figure was strong and well-proportioned, though a little inclined to corpulence, and that the bare hand in which he held his cigar, was

very plump and white, adorned moreover with a diamond ring of no small value ; such a ring as is usually displayed in the foreground of professional men's portraits, meditating under crimson canopies, in irreproachable linen and suits of glossy black.

"Not quite a gentleman," said Helen to herself, as the man made way for her, and lifted his hat with a flourish : "what Walter calls a 'Brummagem swell,' I think," and would have passed on without further notice, but that courtesy enjoined some acknowledgment, however distant, of his civility and his salute. There is hatred at first sight, as there is love. Helen was provoked with herself to feel such unreasonable repugnance towards a man she had never seen before, and was unlikely ever to see again. She would have been more provoked still had she analysed the cause of her dislike. So she inclined her head with that haughty distant gesture which is, I think, the next remove from a positive slap in the face, and passed over the stile with a dexterous whisk of her draperies, that nullified the half-step he made in advance, as though to offer his assistance.

He was determined to speak to her, never-

theless; and was rather irritated that he could not, on the spur of the moment, hit upon some pretext which should give him an excuse for doing so without the appearance of presumption. This was not a case in which he could follow her with his own pocket-handkerchief, affecting to think it was one she had dropped, or offer to remove imaginary briars from the skirt of her dress, or adopt the successful French plan, of informing the lady she had whitened her gown where she could not possibly see it, and dusting it the while with many protestations of deference, and entreaties for forgiveness. Few people are sufficiently brutalized to make these advances to a *lady*, and for the true gentleman every woman is a lady; but with all her softness there was something about Helen that would have bidden the most callous nature pause before venturing on a liberty; so the man put his cigar in his mouth again as she passed on, and racked his brain for a question that should compel her to answer him. He was a connoisseur in voices; he was resolved to hear hers. If it was at all in character with her appearance, he would find out who she was, and see more of her. There was a good deal of persistency and determination

hidden under that smooth, shining skin of his ; a good deal of self-conceit and self-confidence ; not an atom of conscientious scruple or remorse.

There was nothing for it but to ask his way. An old worn-out resource, indeed, yet which seemed to him the least offensive in the present emergency.

It would be absurd to inquire for Middlesworth. There was the town staring him in the face. He must think of some other locality. Hurrying after her, hat-in-hand, breathlessly, he "begged her pardon. There was a short cut somewhere here, and he was afraid he had missed it—would she kindly point out to him the nearest way to Bridlemere ?"

Helen's colour deepened, for the hurrying steps brought to her recollection one or two stories she had heard of plausible footpads, wrenching watches and bracelets from unprotected damsels in lonely thoroughfares. \* She even calculated the defence she could offer with the neat umbrella, and her own speed of foot, for a quarter of a mile, the distance in which she could reach Dame Batters's cottage, and perhaps Jem's formidable aid ; but the voice and manner were so thoroughly

conventional and re-assuring, that she halted and faced about boldly, pointing to the direction from which she came.

“That path takes you to Bridlemere, and on by the back of the stables into the high road.”

She was going to tell him there was no right of way; but, after all, he had the appearance of a gentleman, and she checked the ungracious remark.

It was just the voice he expected, full, sweet, composed, the quiet patrician accent distinct on every syllable.

“Thank you very much,” said the gentleman, with a profusion of bows and superfluity of politeness a little overdone. “I am most anxious to see Bridlemere; they say it is such a charming place, such a beautiful old house. Perhaps you can tell me if I shall be disappointed? Perhaps you know it?”

“Perhaps I do,” answered Helen shortly, for the man’s demonstrative manner provoked her. “I live there.”

“Miss Brooke, I beg you a thousand pardons,” he exclaimed, raising his hat once more, and with as much ceremony as if he had been regularly



introduced by a third person. "I did not expect; I was not aware;" and muttering something about "honour" and "pleasure," and so forth; he passed on, pretty well satisfied with his ingenuity in thus paving the way to an acquaintance with this beautiful young lady.

It cost him an extra walk, though, of more than a mile, for he was proceeding from a neighbouring estate, on which he held a mortgage, to the town of Middlesworth, and he could not, in common decency, but follow the path she had pointed out, as long as there was a chance of Helen turning round. He might have saved himself the trouble, however, for the latter walked on, looking straight before her, with her head rather higher than usual, and a smile of something akin to scorn curling her lip. Miss Brooke was not usually a person to be acted on by external influences, and to-day she had come out from a long and wearisome morning in the library, where she had settled the Squire at last to his accustomed nap, with every inclination to enjoy her release; yet the weather, somehow, seemed spoilt within the last ten minutes. The sky was darker, the wind had turned colder. It would be sure to rain before she could get back.

No; it was none of these drawbacks, but I have said that there are such forces as antipathies. Some philosophers, indeed, opine that they are instincts implanted in our nature to guard us from future enemies, and it might have been something of this kind that affected the young lady all the way to Dame Batters's cottage door. Miss Brooke's step was hardly so light as usual, while she neared\* the porch of that lowly dwelling, to which she was welcome as the song of a wild bird, but Dame Batters recognised it from her chimney-corner, and folding her bare arms in her check apron, came forth to meet her visitor.

"Why, if here b'ain't our young lady," said the old woman, in a voice that constant practice of self-commiseration had toned down to a plaintive and somewhat irritating wail. "Miss Helen sure-lie; an' it do my old eyes good to see her—There, it *do*. Come in, miss, and set down now, an' rest a bit, though it's little young bones like your'n knows of rest nor rheumatics neither." Here remembering her *rôle*, the dame put one hand to her back, and puckered up her old face into a lamentable expression of bodily anguish.

"Why, I hoped the rheumatics were so much

better," said Helen, in her gentle, soothing tones. "You told me that stuff had done you good. I can send you some more. We've got plenty of it at the hall."

"Good, my dear," answered the patient, not without a certain triumph, for people like to be distinguished, even for the obstinacy of their rheumatism. "'Ta'n't likely now, is it, as anythink 'll ever do *me* good? It's in my bones, you see, miss, in my bones it is, and in my bones it'll stop, I know, till they lie in the churchyard, an' I shouldn't wonder if they was to ache a bit at odd times, even there."

This was said with a mixture of pride and resignation, such as that with which a man talks of the comfortable arrangements he has made for survivors after his demise, probably with as little perception of the reality thus anticipated; but it was Helen's especial nature to console. She had a good deal of practice at home; and indeed, when she went out, never failed to bear a ray or two of comfort along with her into every cottage on the estate. The poor people about Bridlemere loved the very ground she walked on, not because Miss Helen was such a "fine lady" as those simple

rustics said, attaching to the epithet a far different meaning from that which it bears in cities, nor because she was generous with her money, as far as her slender means allowed, but that she possessed the sympathetic quality, which interests itself in a neighbour's affairs as earnestly as in its own. This power of projecting the mind and feelings, as it were, into the very existence of others, when applied by means of diverse mental gifts, such as imagination, construction, tact, and ingenuity, to purposes of Art, and bridled, moreover, by a severe taste, constitutes Genius. When it exists simply with average brains, and a warm, honest heart, it merely approaches, and that very closely, the Apostle's definition of Charity. The poor are peculiarly susceptible of its influence, and the kindly word, which proves that the speaker not only pities, but understands the privations of indigence, or the temptations of vice, has warmed many a cold heart, reclaimed many a reckless nature, and raised many a fallen woman out of the mire in which she has been trodden down so ruthlessly.

Though dame Batters was old, dirty, querulous, and to most people thoroughly uninteresting; though her precious Jem was coarse, idle, drunken,

and just thoughtful enough to be dishonest, altogether a very complete specimen of the village black-guard, Helen could listen as kindly to the long-winded complaints of the mother, could thank the son as sweetly for an act of sullen courtesy, as if the one had been a duchess, and the other a dandy; nay, the duchess and the dandy would probably have found her far colder and more distant; would have voted her less "easy to get on with," than did the humble inmates of the cottage.

Jem, unbraced, unwholesome, dishevelled and sodden-looking, rose from the fire-side when the young lady entered, and hid a half-smoked pipe in a wholly dirty hand; then he dragged a wooden chair from its corner, knocked one of the legs home, pulled his greasy cap from its peg, wiped the seat, and grinning in extreme bashfulness, ground it severely along the sanded floor to Miss Helen.

Her rich young voice thanked him so musically as she sat down, that he stood spell-bound, shifting from one leg to the other, and cramming his horny finger into the hidden pipe-bowl, not yet thoroughly extinguished, till he burnt it to the quick. Jem had changed his opinion all at once

about Cissy Brown and Sue Stanion. How could he ever have compared those bouncing, brazen hoydens to such a shining vision as this? He would have given a gallon of beer now, to have had his Sunday coat on; nay, to have only washed his face and hands at the pump.

Mothers have quick perceptions, even when they are old, stupid, and rheumatic. Dame Batters saw her son's confusion, and advanced at once to the rescue.

"He was always a bit dashed with the gentle-folk, was our Jem," said she, grinning significantly at her visitor. "He's not had the schooling, you see, miss, of some on 'em, along o' my being left a lone woman so young, my dear; for a sore heart is a heavy load, and a lame fut makes a long journey. Speak up, Jem," she added, turning briskly on her great, sheepish son. "Speak up, and tell young miss the rights of it. He've got a job at last, miss, what he don't need to be ashamed of, this turn, and that's the truth."

Thus adjured, Jem rolled his eyes, gasped, grinned, and said nothing.

"I was sorry you were out of work so long," observed Helen quietly, ignoring the while the

reason Jem had not been employed of late at the Hall, which she knew perfectly well. "I spoke to my brother for you, and I believe he spoke to papa, but you know papa has been so ill that nothing has been decided either about the embankment, or the farm-road, or the draining, so my brother says we have hands enough at present; but you see, Mrs. Batters, I hadn't forgot my promise the last time I was here."

All this was truth, but not the whole truth. What really took place was as follows: Helen interceded with Jack, who vowed he would not have such an idle, drunken rascal about the place, not if he would do a twelvemonth's work for nothing; but after much coaxing and entreaty from his beloved sister, whom, unlike most brothers, next to the lady in the French print, Jack esteemed the first of womankind, he consented to speak to the governor on the subject. Broaching it, as he hoped, in a lucid interval, the topic was received with such a storm of petulant anger that it fell incontinently to the ground, and was not thereafter alluded to. This was one of the many cases in which the Squire liked his son to have all the trouble of looking after the estate, but none

of its management. Helen was aware that she had no good news to impart, but it was her nature to be considerate with her inferiors, and she let Jem down as easily as circumstances would permit.

"He've got a job at last, though," resumed Dame Batters, rolling the check apron round and round her bare arms. "He've found a friend, have Jem; and they do say a man's best friend is him as pays him reg'lar. Fifteen shillin' a week, Miss, *and* his beer. That's worth—what's your beer worth, Jem? You an' me counted it up a while since. But what call have I to count it up to *you*, Miss Helen? What's a young lady like *you* to know about beer?"

Helen blushed, as if she had suddenly been accused of drinking that sustaining fluid in large quantities. Nevertheless, the beer question seemed not devoid of interest, for she turned away from the old woman's keen, twinkling eyes, and addressed herself to the son.

"I hope, Jem," said she, gravely, "that you won't buy any, now you can get as much as you want for nothing."

He could enter into this topic heartily.



"'Tain't the beer, miss," he explained, deferentially, yet with conscious pride in the importance of the question, and his own familiarity with all its bearings. "'Tain't the beer; leastways, 'tain't the beer alone as done all the mischief. You see, miss, if a chap's dry, may be, and he turns in and takes his half-pint, why it's neither here nor there. But when its weather, and such-like, and a chap's hanging about the town, of a errand, we'll say, and, as like as not, without a dry thread on him, why, I asks your pardon, miss, what's a chap to do? In a 'public,' you see, miss, he gets warmed both inside and out; then he takes his beer with a flourish of lacin' to it, as we calls it, miss; and one man he stands to a friend, and another man he stands to a friend; and it's, 'Jem, 'ere's luck, my boy;' an' 'Jem, you was always a staunch dog, you was;' an' 'Jem, won't you sing us a song?' I ask your pardon, miss; an' that's the way the money goes, an' I've done with it, I have, for one while. 'There !"

He would have put his pipe in his mouth again, but that he suddenly remembered his manners, and did homage once more to Helen by stuffing it into his coat-cuff.

Dame Batters listened approvingly, and reached up to pat her son's burly shoulders, a caress he acknowledged with a shake and a grunt.

Helen was not tired of the beer question yet, apparently, for she had something more to say.

"You haven't told me where your son is going to work?" she observed, looking intently out of doors, as though to see if the weather still held up. "I hope, for your sake, Mrs. Batters, it's not far from here?"

"Stoney Brothers," growled Jem, with a kind of jubilant defiance. "Stoney Brothers. That's the shop, miss—that is; and good luck to it, says I; good luck to both on 'em; for good chaps they be, and especially Master Phil."

"It's Mr. Philip, you see, miss, as got Jem the place," said his mother, interpreting, as it were, with a dignified politeness, to her visitor. "Mr. Philip, as has a good word and a kind for rich and poor, just like yourself, miss; and like will to like, as they say, for you can't keep cows from clover, nor yet cats from cream. And what I says is this: you tell me what a man gets actin' of, and I'll tell you what's the secret thoughts of that man's heart. Butter's bound to come if you do but

keep the churn going; and there's not a mortal thing on this earth as Master Philip would think too good for them as comes off Bridlemere!"

Probably Miss Brooke heard not one word, for she was looking intently over the wide valley, with its broad, peaceful meadows, its dotted homesteads and lines of intersecting hedgerows, to the golden streak of sunset that seemed to be resting on the distant wooded hills. A November sky could scarcely look more settled, and Miss Brooke cared as little for a wetting as a mermaid, nevertheless she took an abrupt departure, hardly noticing Jem's grotesque bow, and wishing his mother a hurried farewell, because she must get home before it came on to rain.

Was it only the pace at which she walked—five miles an hour, I really believe, and every footfall light and springy as a deer's—that brought so high a colour to her face? A colour that went and came a dozen times before she reached the stile where she met the man who asked his way, and whom she had now completely forgotten—a colour that if it would only settle in those delicate cheeks of hers, and remain for the ball to-night, when I dare say she would be very pale, must quite set at

rest any discussions as to who was the best-looking young woman about Middlesworth, besides furnishing an extraordinary treat to the male mufflees-makers and other roughs in the town, who loved to congregate about the ball-room door, and watch carriage after carriage landing its cargo of white muslin, with remarks, it is but justice to say, neither loud nor obtrusive, though extremely sincere, on the respective merits of the competitors.

Perhaps anticipation of this very gathering may have had something to do with the additional bloom on the flower. It is difficult for middle-age—male middle-age especially—to realize a girl's dreams of expectation the day she is going to a ball. To her, I imagine, the ceremonial is a compound of excitement, hope, emulation, triumph, pleasure, business and dissipation, probably with a halo of romance glorifying the whole thing. It is her House of Commons, her Poor-law Board, her lecture-room, her hunting-field, the betting-ring of her racecourse, the deck of her frigate, the front of her general action. In this bright, smooth arena she concentrates the ambition, the amusements, the vicissitudes, the struggles, the victories

—all the best and some of the worst feelings of the other sex—and yet we can sometimes find it in our hearts to grudge the curtailment of our claret, the trouble of dressing after dinner, the inconvenience of standing all night upon not the soundest of feet, in order that she may take her part in this all-important contest. She cannot go without us, more's the pity! Who knows? perhaps to-night she meditates the grand decisive stroke that is to affect her whole life! Shall indolence, self-indulgence, the cosy fire-side, the roomy four-poster, seduce us from our duty as a man and a chaperon? Ring the bell! Get coffee. Tell John to put us out the whitest of neckcloths and the easiest of boots; order the carriage, but let it not come round till it is wanted, for great results are to be obtained only by careful preparation, and the slower she is in dressing the more effective will be her first appearance in the room; our own purgatory is also thus curtailed a little at the nearer end.

Dame Batters looked long and wistfully after Miss Brooke's receding figure; then she shook her head, and accosted Jem, who was sprawling over the fire to light his pipe.

"Jem," said she, "I never see our young Miss not look half so well as she done to-night. Her eyes was as bright as diamonds. Wasn't 'em, Jem? Oh! my poor back!"

Jem made no immediate reply. It was his practice to be very chary of his words with mother, which was, perhaps, the reason she gave him more than due credit for wisdom. I have observed the same result from a judicious reticence in every grade of society. Presently the germ of an idea formed itself in his mind. Puffing gravely at his pipe, he seemed to churn the thought, as it were, and knead it well, before he turned it out for inspection. Then he rose, stretched, yawned, and thus delivered himself—

"Mother?"

"Well, Jem?"

"D'ye mind the heifer as I druv' down the green lane and by our door here, last club-mornin' twelvemonth?"

"I mind her, Jem," replied the Dame. "*I was* bad with the rheumatics that turn. Never a heifer has the Squire bred since not half as good nor yet half as good looking. No, nor Mr. Marks neither. You can't bake hot bread in a cold oven, Jem."

“That heifer wur the cleanest thing ever I saw, mother, bar our Miss Brooke.”

“Bar our Miss Brooke,” repeated the dame. “And you druv’ her to the butcher’s, Jem. Didn’t ye now? I mind it well!”

“Iss,” said Jem. “I druv’ her to the butcher’s.”



## CHAPTER VIII.

### MARKET-DAY.



HAVE already observed that Middlesworth, on occasion, was capable of as much bustle and confusion as if its normal state had been one of brisk commercial activity, rather than complete stagnation and repose. The surrounding country, consisting chiefly of pasture land, was not, therefore, very thickly inhabited; nevertheless, once in the week, the streets of this prosperous town were so densely thronged as to become impassable to all but the most vigorous and resolute pedestrians. It seemed as if the adjoining districts poured their whole population—men, women, children, infants in arms, with all the horses, pigs, waggons, carts,



live stock, poultry, dogs, and animals they could muster, into Middlesworth on market-day. As in all crowds, women predominated largely. They came along the highways and byways for hours during the forenoon, returning in clusters about dark; for, whatever distance they might have to journey, they seemed with one accord to defer their departure for home to as late an hour as possible. Strong, wiry, and able-bodied, her feminine roundness of form somewhat impaired and attenuated by hard fare and hard labour, what a day's work will one of these peasant women do in the fifteen hours of incessant employment that constitute her day! First astir in the humble household to light the fire and prepare her "master's" breakfast; last in bed at night, mending the clothes of the family by the dim flicker of one tallow-candle; every intervening moment has its appropriate task, lightened only by the refreshment of gossip, which she takes standing, and without respite from her employment, whatever it may be. There are the children to dress; there is the cottage to clean; bread to be brought home from the baker's; water to be drawn and carried from the well; the weekly

stores to calculate, and a difficult problem to solve which repeated practice fails to simplify, viz., twelve shillings given, and fifteen required. How to make the sum answer! All the cleaning, all the cooking, all the care, falls on one poor pair of shoulders, and they carry the weight with surprising energy and much loud complaint. To walk four or five miles backwards and forwards on a high road because it is market-day would scarcely seem a desirable addition to her usual task, yet is this weekly pilgrimage her much-prized substitute for the morning concerts, races, archery meetings, picnics, and shopping of the richer class. Wet or dry, frost or sunshine, with tanned face, drenched stockings, and draggled skirt, she plods along, the pattens and umbrella in one hand, the wicker-basket—empty going, full returning—in the other. Whilst in the town she certainly does make the most of her time, loitering over her errands and prolonging her shopping to the utmost possible duration. Perhaps her amusements may be varied by the excitement of extricating a husband, father, or brother from some attractive pot-house and incipient fight; probably to coax him homewards, and guide his inebriated steps the whole

way, propping him up, and replacing his hat, on an average, once in every hundred yards.

The red Indian's squaw prays that her child may not be a girl, for "Weary," says she "is the lot of woman." Hedging, ditching, digging, draining, ploughing, turf-cutting, stone-breaking; however hard he works, I think the English labourer has a far easier time of it than the English labourer's wife. To say nothing of Eve's curse, she encounters as much physical exertion as his; and all the wear-and-tear of mind which her husband escapes. No wonder her comely Saxon face is furrowed, and her soft brown hair streaked with grey before her time.

Were it not for woman's dearest privilege, her never-failing luxury, how could she exist? The solace of conversation, the delightful employment of the tongue, the inspiriting exercise of question and reply; these smooth the roughness of her path, and turn her very tasks to pleasure and pastime. The debates of a rookery on a May morning; the cackle of the Trojan army, as described by Homer; the parrot-room, at the Zoological in the Regent's Park: the shrillest and most overpowering of these discords, would convey but a

faint notion of the monster concert provided by female voices for market-day, in the streets of Middlesworth; add to this, the shouts of drovers, the lowing of oxen, the squealing of pigs, the clatter of Stoney Brothers' waggons, whips cracking in the horse-market, a cheap-jack selling on the Parade, Strider's equestrian band performing in the Square, with the clang of the church clock striking surely more than four times in the hour, through and above all; and it is reasonable to suppose that more than common steadiness of nerve and brain was required to buy even a yard of ribbon, in the midst of all this turmoil.

It was strange how the confusion seemed to quiet the quadrupeds, though they added their share of noise; it was but a feeble effort, and emitted, as it were, under protest. The pigs, indeed, vindicated their character for energetic and persistent rebellion; but the poor oxen lowed very meekly and pitifully; nor, aghast and utterly stupefied by the surrounding clamour, would the young horses show sufficient mettle to attract a purchaser.

The whole town was, more or less, pervaded by general confusion; but its streams all converged in one whirlpool, where also booths were erected

for the further discomfiture of the public, viz., the open space in front of the "Plantagenet Arms." Here a dray had stopped with beer, a coal-cart was discharging its load, five market-women—all with parcels, three with children—had wedged themselves into an impenetrable phalanx. The omnibus was starting from the door, and a farmer's gig, driven by an old man and drawn by a young horse, blocked up the archway. But for great perseverance, and the exertion of much personal strength, Ragman de Rolle, struggling through the crowd, could never have reached his destination, the portals of this long-established hotel and posting house—the well known "Plantagenet Arms."

Rags was in his usual health and spirits, in that state which he himself designated as "very fit," coming from the performance of his duty, or rather, of his friend's duty; he shone, not indeed in the blaze of review order, but in the milder lustre of frogged frock-coat, gold-laced forage cap, much on one side, without a peak, and a pair of killing steel spurs. In this costume, Rags felt more equal to a social emergency than in the obscurity of plain clothes. The chambermaid and waiter looked after him admiring, as he passed

into the bar; and when he reached that *sanctum*, Miss Bolt, its presiding priestess, received him with a giggle and a toss of her sleek head, which denoted partiality and approval.

"You'll take your glass of brown sherry, as usual, Capting de Rolle?" said Miss Bolt, offering at the same time a bumper of that mixture (price one shilling), with a pretty hand garnished by many rings, whereof, the newest, I believe, had been presented, in all honour, by generous Rags. He was a favourite, you see, as might be gathered from her condescending manner and frequent repetition of his name, with the military title she bestowed on all ranks of officers prefixed.

"Is Capting Brooke in the barracks? You can tell me, Capting de Rolle, I dare say. A gentleman have been here, asking for him, repeated."

Rags was gulping at the sherry, and preparing a compliment whilst he swallowed it.

"He would have been, but I am on duty for him," answered the hussar, adding, gallantly, "I don't regret it either, for it keeps me in the town you brighten with your presence, Miss Bolt!"

"Go along with you now, do," replied the lady, who appreciated flattery none the less that she

knew it was fired off in jest. "I never see such a man as you, Capting de Rolle, for your cajoleries—flummery, I call it. I wonder what you take me for, I do."

Miss Bolt had passed many years in citadels such as that in which she was now entrenched; surrounded by outworks of glass, pewter, beer, brandy, nets of lemons, jars of pickles, baskets of game, bottles of bitters, and brown paper parcels; fortified, moreover, by her own rigid sense of decorum, she could afford to do what execution she pleased on a besieging force, and laugh at its efforts to return her fire. These ladies who live habitually before the public, allow themselves, it is true, considerable latitude of speech and manner. Their circle is no doubt a large one; but they are careful not to overstep its boundary. In flirtation they are great proficient. How, indeed, can it be otherwise? Practising it as they must, hour after hour, and day after day, for months together, with every class of the male species, from peers to potato-salesmen, including the commercial traveller—a variety no less remarkable for audacity of wit, than for fluency of language—in that choice kind of repartee which depends for its success on

pointed personal allusion, they are unrivalled ; and they possess, moreover, the advantage of a partial audience, and an encounter on their own ground ; but with all their freedom of speech, they deny themselves, scrupulously, a corresponding liberty of action ; with every temptation to evil, they are almost without exception, untainted by vice ; and, to use their own language, “know their place, and take care to keep their-selves respectable.”

It did not cost Rags much trouble to finish a glass of brown sherry ; yet, ere he had half swallowed his shilling’s worth, as many different characters had come into, and gone out of Miss Bolt’s *sanctum*, as pass and repass the stage of a theatre in a pantomime.

The Chairman of Quarter Sessions, burly, good-humoured, and gentlemanlike, happy mixture of squire, sportsman, and magistrate, paused there to desire his Clerk of the Peace might be sent to him forthwith. He was sixteen stone, and a grandfather ; nevertheless, he congratulated Miss Bolt on her good looks and brilliant ear-rings ; wishing himself, he said, “a young man, and a sherry drinker again, for her sake.” Miss Bolt, much gratified, returned the compliment in kind, with



a sportive allusion to his youthful appearance, which sent the old gentleman away shaking his jolly sides. He was succeeded by a High-Church rector, starched to the ears, and buttoned to the chin, who asked for a parcel of books, that should have come down by train ; but, of course, had not arrived. For him, Miss Bolt took pains to explain the railway arrangements, which were indeed sufficiently complicated, and in the disentangling of which the good man showed less than his usual powers of perception : even *his* last words, however, were, "I trust everything to *you*, Miss Bolt!" But, before Rags could remark, in a loud whisper, "What touching confidence!" Mrs. Marks, from the new farm at Bridlemere, brought her little boy to be taken care of, while she went to look for Marks in the horsefair. Miss Bolt turned from a business-like coquette to a loving matron in the twinkling of an eye. She stuck the little man against the back of an arm-chair, put a sweet biscuit in his fist, and was down on her knees smoothing his flaxen curls, and making friends with him, before Rags could express admiration of her fondness for children, and regret that she had not a bouncing family of her

own. The boy, sticking his fat legs straight out, and making round eyes, as children do when utterly at a loss, suffered himself to be comforted with considerable philosophy, and gazed in undisguised wonder at De Rolle's general appearance, and the rapid succession of Miss Bolt's visitors.

Mrs. Marks was hardly gone ere Marks appeared, looking for her; and that smart young agriculturist could not think of following his wife without a word for his first-born, and a glass of sherry and bitters for himself: then he got into conversation with Rags, on the merits of a certain young horse; and still an endless stream of Miss Bolt's admirers poured in and out. The auctioneer, from the market-place, portly, well-whiskered, and high-coloured, with his thumbs in the armholes of his black satin waistcoat, and his white hat stuck very much over one eye; the rising apothecary, from round the corner, clean-shaven, white-cravated, smooth-spoken, affecting a gravity beyond his years, and the general pomposity of an authorised physician; one of Mr. Dowlas's young men, with a parcel Lady Julia had ordered and forgotten; the sporting saddler Will Whipthong, a little "sprung," from having entertained a few friends

at an early dinner; two grave men who had ordered tea at four, p.m.; and who looked like undertakers, but were, in reality, agents for the establishment of a new branch bubble bank. George Stoney asking for his brother Philip, and presently, Philip asking for George; a little girl belonging to nobody, who wanted change for a doubtful half-crown; the cellarman, the head ostler, the parish clerk, the tax-gatherer, and presently, a select detachment of the commercial gentlemen, smiling, self-confident, and *débonair*, fresh from their dinner in the commercial room.

It was long odds against Rags; but he made a good fight of it, notwithstanding. The frogged coat, the spurs, the indispensable riding whip, the brown sherry, and a huge cigar, inspired him with confidence. He bandied jests with the auctioneer; he stared the apothecary out of countenance; he accepted Will Whipthong's flattery, not entirely disinterested, with a good-humoured condescension. A second glass of sherry put him on equal terms with the commercial gentlemen, who are always inclined to be sociable, especially with military men, and the rest of the visitors he found himself in a position to ignore.

Rags felt he was monopolizing Miss Bolt—such is the vanity inherent in the male sex, that it was gratifying to know himself the object, even of a barmaid's admiration ; and he accepted it thirstily, as an earnest of successes to come in a higher sphere.

Perhaps he was right. To kill a salmon, and to land a trout, are efforts of the same skill, differing only in degree. The nobler fish demands but stronger tackle and a gaudier fly—a greater hardihood, perhaps ; but not a whit more art. Cinderella at the ball, is still the Cinderella of the kitchen. Toothless Lyce's heart is as near her lips as that of smiling, whispering Lalage. Castle and cottage surrender alike, when they begin to parley. Neither the duke's nor the dairyman's daughters are proof against subtle stratagem, bold assault, or persevering blockade. From Dido to Dorcas ; from Pasiphae to Pamela, few, when they find it, but will bend to the master-hand. Though all are riddles, it seems there is but one solution for the whole sex, and Congreve was not perhaps much mistaken, when he makes them sing—

“ Nothing's new except our faces :  
Every woman is the same.”

Rags was getting on swimmingly. It took him, indeed, several seconds to prepare his little speeches; but they were received cordially; and notwithstanding frequent interruptions, responded to graciously in kind. The conversation proceeded somewhat as follows:—

Rags, with the utmost sweetness, “How nicely you do your hair, Miss Bolt. I haven’t seen such hair as yours, since we marched into Middlesworth. I suppose you wouldn’t give a poor fellow a lock of it; would you now?—though you have plenty to spare, and it’s most of it real, of course.”

Miss Bolt, laughing in a succession of short, shrill gasps, “The idea; I should have thought you knew better than to——”

Waiter, entering in a hurry, perspiring freely, “Glass of sherry and bitters, for No. 4.”

Miss Bolt, hardening once more in the exercise of her profession, “You know I can’t abide flummery, Capting de Rolle. I’m sure if I thought you was serious, I should be very——”

Same waiter, only a trifle warmer :

“Two teas, an’ a pint of ale, for No. 5.”

Rags, taking refuge in the last drop of his sherry—

“I know, I should be very—yes, very grateful. I’d put it in a locket, and hang it round my neck, and never take it off, even to shave.

“And if any one was asking me the reason why I wear it,  
I’d say it’s ’cause my true love is——”

Waiter re-entering, compelled at last to mop his face with a dinner-napkin.

“Two letters and a parcel, for No. 6.”

Second waiter, approaching with noiseless step, and an air of perfect candour—

“Party in the coffee-room wishes to know when No. 6 will be back?”

Landlord’s daughter, a small child, with her front teeth gone, and not yet replaced, lisping painfully—

“Father says, please Miss Bolt, did No. 6 have his letters before he went out?”

Head ostler, venturing but half his person, huskily, as one whose rest is habitually broken, and who drinks a mixture of gin and hay-seeds—

“From the Telegraph office — message for No. 6.”

Miss Bolt—“Bother No. 6!”

And when Rags, improving his opportunity,

condoled with her on the hardships of her position, the variety of her duties, and the public nature of a department in which she was “wasting her sweetness,” though she neither “blushed” nor remained “unseen,” he was a little piqued to observe that her attention wavered obviously, and fixed itself on a voice in the passage giving certain directions, in which the words “servant,” “lodge,” “luggage,” and “fly,” were alone audible.

It was a mellow, manly voice, grave in tone, rather than sad, and with a peculiarly clear enunciation of each syllable. A listener might be sure, without seeing him, that the owner had good teeth, and shut them tight together when he spoke.

Miss Bolt listened for a second or two with the utmost earnestness; then a smile, like a sunbeam—a very different smile from those she kept by her for daily use—broke over her face. She shook her ear-rings till they jingled again; her eyes sparkled, her cheeks glowed, and she looked twice as pretty now, while she clasped her hands, and exclaimed—

“Goodness, gracious me! I do declare, if there isn’t Sir Archibald!”

She guessed right. While she spoke, the person she called Sir Archibald entered the bar. A man of middle age—nay, middle age is but a relative term, according to the distance at which those who use it believe themselves to be from either end of the rope. Here, where it is made fast to the shore, a few fathoms out constitute middle age; yonder, where it drips already with the spray, and is about to lose itself in the silent sea, an inch or two yet further out is considered still to indicate this doubtful period. I remember when I thought a man of five-and-thirty middle-aged. I call him “a young fellow” now. Well, it is not worth discussing—“A soldier’s a man; a life’s but a span,” and its termination as uncertain at one period as another; so that, for most of us, there is no such thing as middle age, after all.

Sir Archibald, then, was a good bit over fifty; but, like many men who have spent their youth in a life of constant toil and hardship, he seemed rather to have hardened and toughened from repeated kneading than worn by the friction of continuous use. His walk was springy and elastic; his frame very spare and muscular. Every atom of superfluous flesh seemed to have



been absorbed by exercise, or drained from his system by the action of tropical heat. His very face was but skin and bone. Skin tanned, bronzed, and wrinkled ; bone harsh, angular, and prominent. The whole clean shaved, all but a heavy moustache, which, like his hair, was rapidly turning white. Nevertheless, there was beauty still, and that of an engaging kind, in the old, worn face ; beauty such as a young girl loves to look upon, and weave for herself a drama of passion, adventure, and romance, as acted out by the possessor—

“ So bronzed, so marred, of more than twice her years.”

She gives it credit for former attractions, which perhaps it never possessed ; destroyed by dangers and vicissitudes, on which perhaps it never looked. There is many an Elaine who allows her fancy to be thus captivated by a veteran Launcelot ; kindling, it may be, in turn, the embers of a dead grey fire into a feeble transient glow. Her fancy only, not her heart ; poor girl, let her keep that treasure for a younger, brighter, fresher, more congenial love. This old man looked indeed as if his past career had been of no common order, as

if his character was one of no conventional cast. It was something in the eyes that betrayed him, that contradicted the quiet matter-of-fact, respectable appearance of dress and demeanour he thought it consistent with his time of life to affect. They were very keen, dark, and bright; set deep under a pair of bushy brows, which still retained their youthful blackness. There was habitually that glitter in them which you will never observe but in eyes that are accustomed, day by day, to stare death out of countenance, which the youngest and freshest recruit acquires in six weeks' campaigning, if pretty close to the enemy; also, at times, they shone with a soft, deep, tender lustre that spoke of ardent affections, undying regrets, and holy, hopeless love, chastened by memory into a religion, bearing to look back on the past, because it could look forward to the future, having nothing to lose now, and therefore nothing to fear.

Do not think, however, that his was a countenance those who run may read. Sir Archibald was the last person to carry his heart on his sleeve. To the casual observer, he was but a shrewd, hard, practised man of the world—a little

abrupt, a little caustic, and somewhat intolerant of anything like weakness or want of common sense.

His popularity, nevertheless, seemed to extend beyond the bar, from which retirement Miss Bolt handed him a light for his cigar, with as much delighted deference as if he had been a prince of the blood. Marks, returning for his child, welcomed him back to the country with a perfect storm of congratulations. The head ostler stood grinning at him through a window that commanded the passage. A buxom chambermaid came in three times for the same order, beaming brightly on Sir Archibald, and was rebuked, reasonably enough, by Miss Bolt for carelessness and inattention. The landlord's little daughter recognised him, and held up her toothless mouth to be kissed. The very boots touched his fur cap, and was glad to see "Sir Archibald looking so well." Philip Stoney, again in search of George, shook hands with him enthusiastically, and was quite pleased to be asked concerning the well-being of the chestnut horse. Everybody in Middlesworth seemed to know this brown man, with his white moustaches, and to be glad to see him back.

“Who is he?” whispered Rags to Miss Bolt. “Seems a popular chap—ought to stand for the town.”

“What! don’t you know Sir Archibald?” replied the barmaid. I thought everybody knew Sir Archibald. Why, he is——”

Hot waiter entering in a hurry—“No. 6 come in! Letters, parcels, bottle of soda-water, to No. 6!”

“Everybody don’t know him, you see,” persisted Rags; for I don’t. What’s his name? Where does he hang out?”

“Well, he don’t live here—more’s the pity,” replied Miss Bolt, frowning reprovingly the while at the continuous tingling of a bell, which professional instinct told her was jerked by the impatience of No. 6, and which, it is needless to observe, rang immediately outside the door distinguished by that numeral. “He don’t live near here, but he’s often amongst us at odd times. You see, Sir Archibald is the——”

Interrupted again by the warm and noiseless waiter, velvet-footed, and perspiring, as before—

“Half a lemon, lump sugar, wax candles, dozen sheets of note-paper and envelopes, for No. 6.”

“Well, I’m sure! I wish No. 6 was further!”

“And who the deuce is No. 6?” burst from Miss Bolt and Rags simultaneously; but it appeared that Sir Archibald knew even No. 6, for almost while they spoke, he turned to shake hands with a dark, fresh-coloured, smartly-dressed gentleman, who entered the bar to complain that his orders were not attended to with the despatch he required.

“The last place I should have expected to meet you in, Multiple,” said Sir Archibald, who did not seem to like No. 6 as well as No. 6 liked him.

“Delighted to see you, I’m sure!” replied the other, with a cordiality perhaps a little overdone.

“Business brought me here, as you may suppose—business and pleasure combined—or I shouldn’t be staying in this cursed hotel.”

Miss Bolt looked daggers.

“Gentleman!” said she. “Nice gentleman, you are, I think!—not my sort, at any rate.” But her sort of gentleman, or none, he was a customer, so she wisely said it to herself.

“That means you are going to the ball to-night,” observed the other; and Miss Bolt thought

he drew his bushy eyebrows down over his eyes closer than before.

“I suppose I must look in for half an hour,” answered Mr. Multiple, running his white hand through his black hair. “Not much to tempt one, I fancy, though, down here. You know the people better than I do, Sir Archibald, beauties and all. I suppose the whole thing is very provincial?”

There was a gleam of amusement in Sir Archibald’s eye, but he observed, with creditable gravity—

“A London man is quite a windfall here, Multiple. The Middlesworth girls are celebrated for tenacity. If you dance, they’ll run you off your legs, like an over-driven post-horse. If you sit still, they’ll swarm about you, like flies round a honey-pot. I advise you to look out; not one of them but carries her grapnels, and they don’t drag their anchors, I promise you.”

Multiple suspected his friend was laughing at him. He was shrewd enough to know that vanity as regards the other sex was his foible, and to conceal his weakness as far as possible; also, the fencer’s first instruction, never to betray how

nearly his guard had been broken, so he answered gravely—

“A ball is a ball, even a hundred miles from town. I’ve done a good day’s work to-day, and I have a right to amuse myself. Two-and-twenty letters written, and a ten-mile walk, Sir Archibald. Pretty well that for a cockney?”

“I hope you have made it answer,” was the reply; “a man ought to be handsomely paid for all that exertion of body and mind.”

“I must have turned about five hundred,” said Multiple, carelessly. “You make your ‘monkey’ in a shorter time on a race-course, but really it’s almost as hard work. It’s not worth my while to be absent from our place, under a good many hundreds, as you know, Sir Archibald.”

“Indeed, I did not!” replied the latter; “but I’m glad to hear it, for your sake. I only wish my time was half as valuable;” and he wondered the while what could induce his friend to make this astounding statement. He knew him well enough to be aware that its truth or falsehood had nothing to do with its enunciation. He reflected that the other knew him also well enough to have spared his breath. What puzzled

him was, why it should be published here, for the benefit of a barmaid and a young officer in undress.

“It’s a nice country about Middlesworth,” added Multiple, in a sly, soliloquizing tone. “I’ve seen the prettiest view to-day that has pleased my eye for a long time, and that sort of thing makes an impression on me. I am like Beppo’s Count, you know—

‘Wax to receive, and marble to retain.’

I must have another look at it before long. And where do you think I’ve been, Sir Archibald, on my way back? Why, right through the park at Bridlemere.”

The bushy eyebrows went down this time without a doubt. Miss Bolt was watching them, and she was sure of it.

“A fine place, isn’t it?” said Sir Archibald, carelessly; “and been a long time in the family. Good morning, Multiple; I’m rather late as it is, and must be moving now.” So, with a courteous bow to Miss Bolt, who returned it enthusiastically, he walked forth, and plunged into the whirlpool of traffic still seething, and roar-



ing, and raging, in front of the "Plantagenet Arms."

Mr. Multiple retired to consume the additional dozen of note-paper and envelopes in the imaginary privacy of No. 6. Rags and Miss Bolt whispered confidentially on matters, I imagine, of a nature which she designated "flummery;" and Sir Archibald, puffing thoughtfully at his cigar, walked down the High Street of Middlesworth, absorbed in profound, and apparently somewhat anxious meditation.

Whilst in the heart of the town, and in the midst of the market-day bustle, he was interrupted at every step by some hearty greeting, some weather-beaten face; but as he gradually approached its outskirts, these became less frequent; and by the time he reached the bridge of which I have already spoken, he was in complete solitude, and immersed in his own thoughts.

To judge by his face, these were of no very enviable nature. Its expression had quite changed since he first accosted Miss Bolt, in the bar of the "Plantagenet Arms." Then he was bright, benevolent, and smiling; now he seemed anxious, uneasy, and even wretched. He jerked the end

of his cigar into the stream, with an impatient action that suggested an oath, and walked on very fast, taking the footway to Bridlemere.

It was late in the afternoon, within an hour of dark ; a breeze, rising with the approach of night, sighed mournfully through the woods that crested the rising ground about the hall. He reached the stile at which Helen had bestowed her unwilling answer on the pedestrian, but there was no need for Sir Archibald to ask his way. No need, for every gleam in the landscape, every fence, every furrow, every tree in the hedgerows, seemed burnt in, as it were, by fire, on his memory. There was no more chance of his forgetting them than there is of your forgetting that summer sunset when heaven seemed to have come down for you upon earth ; or that cold, leaden dawn, when you looked about you, stupefied, and wondered whether there could be sorrow like to your sorrow, and spoke to your crushed heart aloud, telling it, that henceforth there was neither hope nor rest for ever ; laughing, perhaps, in bitter scorn, rebellious and erect, where it had been wiser to kneel, and weep, and pray.

If Sir Archibald had been stricken blind some

twenty years before, he could still have described every turn in that walk from Middlesworth to Bridlemere as plainly as he saw it to-day.

A man who has lived half a century, cannot but have known strange and sad experiences. It needs no stirring career, it needs no mighty tempests on the great ocean of life, to have made him familiar with its dangers and its shipwrecks. There are quicksands, shifting and treacherous, in the shallows: there are hidden reefs for him who creeps along the shore. The bark that stands boldly out into blue water is perhaps the safest, after all. But whatever his course has been, and whatever reverses he has met with, memory is to him either a blessing or a curse, according as he is climbing slowly, wearily, yet hopefully, towards the golden hills, or speeding faster and faster, reckless, on his downward way.

Horace tells us, and the heathen poet was a philosopher in his way, that nothing can rob us of the past. A sound crack on the pate, producing concussion of the brain, had probably escaped his reasoning. We are neither philosophers nor heathens, and have a nobler and fuller satisfaction in the conviction that nothing can rob us of the

future. And is there not some strange, mysterious affinity, of which we are vaguely conscious, like men in a dream, between the past and the future? For good, though not for evil, shall not that which hath been be again? Sin and sorrow, we believe, will indeed die to all eternity; but shall not love, though it has come down on earth to be bruised and soiled, and trodden under foot, shed its well-remembered fragrance around us again, renewed and purified, holy and stainless, for ever in heaven?

Sir Archibald's brow cleared as he walked on. Soon he entered the park, and made straight for the shrubberies that surrounded the house of Bridlemere. Now and then he paused, as if to note some alteration; a vista that had closed, a plantation that had grown up, or a tree that had been cut down. His eye grew brighter at every step, and presently stooping to unfasten the gate of the wire fencing that protected Helen's garden, something like a tear trembled on his eyelash. If so, it was a tear of pure and unmixed joy, for a woman's light foot-fall came fast along the walk, a woman's dress rustled amongst the evergreens, and Helen, emerging from their shadow, seized

him violently by both hands, shaking them up and down with a triumphant welcome, while she exclaimed rapidly, and breathless with the haste she had made :

“I rushed to the front door when I heard the fly ; then I knew you’d walked, and I was sure you’d go through my garden, and oh, Uncle Archie, I’m so glad you’re come !”



## CHAPTER IX.

“UNCLE ARCHIE.”

**T**O account for Sir Archibald's arrival at Bridlemere, and his cordial reception by his niece, it is necessary to look into his antecedents, and for the elucidation of these I must ask you to go back quite a quarter of a century, and to take your position with me on the wide door-steps of a certain edifice in St. James's Street, which was then known as Crockford's Club.

At that period this was a favourite resort with some hundreds of the gentlemen of England, who, finding life in London not sufficiently varied and interesting during the rest of the twenty-fours into which they contrived to condense a week's amuse-

ment, were accustomed to congregate here at midnight, for the purpose, so they said, of social gossip and cigar smoking.

I am bound to accept this explanation, for there were certainly many temptations to remain upstairs, within—a large, lofty drawing-room, heavily furnished and decorated, all gold and crimson—a long supper-room, lustrous with innumerable wax-lights, glancing and glittering on glass, plate, china, and the gaudy variety of the choicest supper that could be laid for a hundred epicures, on a snowy-white tablecloth. Here, feasting at the board, sat scores of the best known and best looking faces in London, in clean white neck-cloths, and the rigid costume of the English gentleman dressed for dinner, but all with their hats on. Waiters, solemnly and studiously attired, handed different delicacies about with dignified persuasion, and proffered cooling drinks, of skilful compounds, in which champagne was the weakest and least expensive ingredient. Naturally, there was no want of conversation, yet, at intervals, above the hum of voices, might be heard a subdued rattle, and a sharp, though smothered rap, proceeding from an adjoining apartment, where

shaded lamps shed a softer lustre on a long green table, protected from the doorway by a folding-screen. Here people played hazard, and played it very high. Now and again, a performer would enter the supper-room quietly and unobtrusively, to take his place at the board, but his success, or the reverse, could hardly be gathered from his demeanour. The winners, I think, seemed more inclined to trifle with "cups," and such mixtures, whilst the losers plunged rashly into lobster-salad, and drank their champagne unadulterated. Perhaps, to a very intimate friend, one would hold up two or more white-gloved fingers (they always played in white kid gloves), to indicate the landing of so many hundreds; or another, with a scarce perceptible shrug, might whisper, he had "had a baddish night," but beyond this, the external composure observed would have edified a stoic. A man might be made or marred, but he gave no sign. Then, whether he lost or won, ate or drank, he would go down and smoke his cigar in the cool night-air on the steps.

It is but a few minutes past twelve. Very hot, even here, outside. People have hardly arrived yet from the House, from the opera (there is only



one opera in this remote period, and Grisi is young, and oh, how beautiful! with a voice

“ To draw

Another host from heaven, to break heaven's law ”),

from their various evening haunts and evening engagements. So two young gentlemen, of whom one is subsequently to become a peer, and the other a gold-digger, have the steps to themselves. They are well dressed, well looking, and betray that air of being bored, without being tired, which sits so naturally on men who have nothing to do, and do it perseveringly, from morning till night.

Says the future peer to the future gold-digger—  
“What has become of Archie Brooke? Wasn't here last night; wasn't here night before. Can't be gone out of town, for I saw his servant to-day. Didn't ask servant; fool not to.”

Gold-digger, much exhausted from having sat for an hour in the drawing-room at White's, over the way—“Wouldn't have told you. Good man; never knows. Wouldn't say his master was in the next room if you were talking to Archie through the door. Wish my man would send me away; try for Brooke's.”

Peer prospective—"Wonder if he's bolted. Deuced hard up, Won a cracker here three nights ago; suppose he'd take that with him. Brother wouldn't pay his debts, of course."

Gold-digger *in posse*—"Of course not! Know mine wouldn't. Here comes Tiny. Same regiment. Safe to know."

Tiny, who is something over six feet high, with a merry, girlish face at the top, and who is going to the bad as fast as only a mother's darling can, bounces up the steps, and is stopped by the pair.

"Brooke?" says Tiny, in answer to their inquiries, "Gone a crowner! No end of a crowner! Sent in his papers. I'm sorry for it, though it gives me a step. I say, I think I shall go in and have a shy."

So they all go in, and "have a shy," in which process Tiny anticipates his one-and-twentieth birth-day to a tune that astonishes even the family man of business, when he comes to arrange this young gentleman's affairs.

It was perfectly true. Archie Brooke, in a regiment of the Guards, popular, good looking, fond of London, fond of society, above all things fond

of his profession and his battalion, had sent in his papers to sell, and taken his brother officers completely by surprise. His Colonel, an old Peninsular (there were Peninsulars then, as there are Crimeans now), had a private interview with him, to dissuade the most promising of his chickens from so irremediable a step. If it was money matters, he even proposed to help him, and that was a fine trait in the old soldier, and appreciated as such by the young one. No; it was *not* money. He offered to show the Colonel his account at Cox and Greenwood's, with some hundreds (I fear partly the produce of the “cracker” above hinted at) standing to his credit. Why was he resolved, then, to throw all his chances so completely overboard? Had he got into a scrape? Would he confide in his old friend and Colonel? Unless it was very bad indeed, surely they might *pull him through*. No; he was in no scrape. He required no pulling at all. He was resolved to leave London—to leave England. There were reasons for it, he told the Colonel; strong reasons; he could not explain; and in ten days from that interview with his commanding officer, Captain Brooke, late of the Brigade of Guards, was dazzling his eyes in the sun-glint

off the blue Mediterranean, from the quay at Marseilles.

I presume nobody ever remained in that city an hour longer than necessary, combining, as it does, the dirt, the heat, the sterility of Africa, with the incessant bustle and activity of France. It was not long before Brooke found himself in Algeria, on terms of the utmost cordiality with a whole French garrison, in the city of Constantine. Here his military predilections tempted him sorely to don the large, loose *pantalon*, and well-cut braided jacket of the Chasseurs d'Afrique. What he wanted was excitement, adventure, incessant effort, and oft-recurring danger; something to stifle memory, and leave no time for thought. A campaign against the Khabyles would be the very thing. But he could not quite make up his mind about the justness of the Frenchman's cause. Was it right thus to hunt the Emir to death for the advancement of civilization? Was it worthy of the great nation thus to appeal, unprovoked, to the arbitration of the sword? Campaigning for sheer bitterness of spirit was all very well, but there were two sides to the question, just as there were two opposing forces to constitute the cam-

paign. The arguments were nicely balanced, and Archie Brooke, at this period of his life, was no great casuist. He could not make up his mind whether he ought to draw the sword with the invaders, or join "The long-winged Hawk of the Desert," fighting gallantly for independence, and liberty, and life.

The story goes that the ex-guardsman, sitting in a café at Constantine, by a little round table covered with a marble slab, having a glass of *absinthe* before him, an infamous French cigar in his mouth, and a gay party of French subalterns looking on, deliberately tossed up whether he should ride in their ranks as a volunteer, or pass the outposts at once, and offer his services to Abd-el-Kader. The louis came down "tails," and the chivalrous Frenchmen shook hands with him all round, wishing him a cordial and kindly farewell, though henceforth they would never meet again save as cruel enemies in a warfare so fierce that quarter was too seldom asked, and indeed far too often denied.

Archie Brooke turned up again with a tanned face and a close-shaven head, under a white *burnouse*, at Abd-el-Kader's right hand, when the

Emir held a certain review, in which ten thousand of the Chivalry of the Desert ranked past him, horse by horse, and man by man. Horse clean, wiry, sinewy, untiring; man spare, swarthy, fierce, unconquered: the beast and its master remarkable alike for flashing eye, distended nostrils, clean, small, noble head, and a haughty, tameless bearing that seemed to smack wildly of the waste.

The Emir himself looked no unworthy leader for such a host. His keen eye glittered like a falcon's under the snowy hood which threw his war-worn face into deep shadow. His nervous, wiry figure, of which the muscular proportions were scarcely concealed by the loose, white garments that drooped about him, sat erect upon his lofty cumbrous saddle, unlike those of his chiefs, ornamented only by a border of seed-pearls embroidered on its velvet housings. His black mare, with her clean, small head and scarlet nostril, arched her foam-flecked neck, as she champed and fretted on a powerful bit, under the loose rein and light touch of her rider's hand. A cord of twisted tissue, striped like a serpent's skin, secured the hood of the Emir's burnouse; a sharp sabre hung, edge uppermost, at his belt.

Save these, arms and ornaments he had none ! Yet the Englishman, scanning that white draped figure on the good black mare, standing out from the array of Arab chivalry, apart and by itself. wondered no longer at the Emir's ascendancy over his people, at their heroic and unreasoning devotion to one, in whom, like a second Mahomet, they believed, as warrior, priest, and king.

Soon the ten thousand horsemen formed in their respective tribes, and a chosen troop from each curveted into a smooth, green space before the Emir, and drew up in opposing bands. Then a chief on a chestnut stallion, thick and muscular, like one of the Elgin marbles, dashed out into the midst, and reined short up, man and horse quivering all over with suppressed energy and fire. Another, wheeling round him at a gallop, cast an unerring spear within a hand's-breath of his turban ; and the chestnut horse, springing to speed at a bound, dashed off in hot pursuit. A dozen strides and he had caught his enemy : the lance was up to strike, and so like fierce earnest was this warrior's play, it seemed as if it must transfix the fugitive. But no, a turn of wrist, a touch of heel, the chestnut skimmed aside like a swallow on the

wing, and swooped at another foe, fresh emerged from the opposing phalanx. Another and another shot out to swell the game, and then a dozen, and then a score, till the whole were engaged, and the eye saw nothing but one wild whirl of streaming manes and glancing steel, and floating draperies, and flash of pistols, through a cloud of dust; and here and there, above the dim confusion, the fragments of a shivered spear, shot high into the air.

Then the dust rolled away. The skirmish subsided; chiefs were standing by panting steeds, stroking the pointed ears and dripping, shining necks of their favourites. Here a girth had been broken, there a warrior rolled over, man and horse, on the sand: but beyond this, so skilful were the human, so well broken the animal performers, that nothing resembling a casualty had occurred. Abd-el-Kader bowed his head in dignified approval to the warlike Arab on the chestnut stallion, who galloped up to signify the conclusion of the sports by flinging down a broken lance at the Emir's feet. The play was over—the real drama was about to begin.

The Chieftain signed to his lieutenants to attend



him. All but one came cantering up and wheeled into their places on his flank. This last was he whom Abd-el-Kader most favoured and most trusted. He rode in slowly and steadily at a walk. Brooke was watching the Emir, and for an instant saw his dark eye dilate, but not another sign of discomposure betrayed itself either in the pale, calm face or the stately, motionless figure. Not a sign, and yet in that instant Bou Maza levelled his pistol point-blank at the Chieftain's heart: the next, his horse, the noblest in the desert, stumbled on that smooth, level surface, fell on his head and rolled completely over his rider, who lay confused and helpless, with the smoking pistol, which had gone off harmless in his grasp.

The Englishman was the first down to catch the traitor by the throat, though his hand had hardly closed ere a score of sabres were flashing in the sun, a score of voices hoarse with rage dooming the fallen man to instant death; but the Emir's calm, cold tones rose above the angry Arab gutturals, as they had risen many a time, distinct and measured, above tap of drum and roll of musketry, and swelling battle-cry of France, and the Emir's face looked upon the tumult pale,

mild and peaceful, as though reposing in his harem, while he spoke.

“Harm him not!” said he, raising his voice slowly to command attention. “In the name of Allah, lift him up, give him back his arms, let his hands be free, and bring him here, that he may look upon my face and live !”

Bou Maza was a bold man, or he had hardly undertaken the crime which had thus been so strangely thwarted. He was an Arab, too, and could accept death with the strange composure that never seems to desert those fatalists when face to face with the inevitable ; but his features worked with something keener than terror, and the foam was on his lip, while his black eyes sought the ground, and he shrank and cowered like a dog before the man whom he had just failed to murder.

“Bou Maza,” said the Emir, in deep, quiet, sorrowful tones, “do you think I had not foreseen, and could not have prevented, your attempt on your Chieftain’s life? When you left the Council yesterday it was in your heart, that you would to-day murder your Father, as it was in mine that you would fail and be forgiven.

“Can you not see the hand of Allah, who caused your best horse to stumble and fall over a blade of tender grass, that you might not slay his prophet, whom he has destined to victory?”

“Bou Maza, go in peace. Go to the enemies of your country and your faith. Tell them of your treachery—tell them of your failure. Tell them that Allah protects his prophet alike from the steel of a traitor as from the bullet of an open enemy. You shall have a free pass to their outposts. Take with you horse and arms, water and provisions. Go in peace, I say, and look upon my face no more!”

The Emir was as good as his word. Bou Maza was permitted to pass out of the camp, and proceed unmolested to his new friends, who received him with no great cordiality, as, indeed, he could hardly expect they should, after an attempt of so heinous a nature, which had, moreover, failed at the moment of execution.

Archie Brooke used often to declare that he had never thoroughly realized “chivalry” till he looked on the Emir’s calm, noble face, while he extended pardon and protection to the traitor.

I am not writing Sir Archibald Brooke’s

biography. Another scene or two, and I have done. If circumstances help to form the character of the man, the man's nature again forces him into those situations which re-act upon it in their turn. An adventurer at thirty is an adventurer all his life. Brooke came back to England after Abd-el-Kader was taken prisoner. Nay, he even re-appeared in St. James's Street, rode in the Park, went to the Derby, staid a whole fortnight in town, was a little disappointed to find how many friends had forgotten him, and how the few whose memories were more tenacious, had not missed him at all, and thought he was still in the Guards! The Squire, too, his elder brother, had run up for the Great Race, leaving Mrs. Brooke in the country. "There was *another* coming," he said, with a laugh and depreceating shrug of the shoulders. "Archie would be with them directly the nurse was out of the house. Of course, his old room was always ready for him at Bridlemere." And Archie promised, and shook\*his brother cordially by the hand; but long before the functionary alluded to had left the bedside of her pale, happy, lovely charge, he was battling with a sou'-wester in the Atlantic, steam against storm

—the one power groaning, gasping, throbbing, quivering, yet wresting some two knots an hour from the headlong violence of the other—and ere the second boy was weaned, his uncle had already gained more than one success in South America, commanding a brigade of ruffians, in comparison with whom his old friends the Khabyles were perfect gentlemen and philanthropists.

Sir Archibald never liked to talk much of this stage of his career. I think he was a little ashamed of his cause and his comrades. He had joined them, too, in a moment of morbid and unworthy feeling. What right had he to discipline robbers, and point guns, and manœuvre manslaughter on a great scale, because the old dull pain at his heart still goaded him to action? Could he not drink his opiate, so to speak, but out of a human skull? He recrossed the Atlantic after a time, and went no more to England, but flitted through France into Eastern Europe, and set himself down for a brief resting space within an hour's ride of Bucharest, and took a farm on that rich Wallachian soil, and reaped one abundant harvest, and so departed to rove about aimlessly as before.

He lingered in Turkey for a while, as those do who are tired of European life and manners. And, indeed, so utterly are East and West at variance, that a man to tolerate either must be thoroughly disgusted with its converse. Sir Archibald liked the people: not the Greeks, but the bold, dominant Osmanli race. He appreciated their solemn courtesy, their grave, proud bearing, their truth, their hospitality, their courage, their generosity, their defiance of misfortune, their contempt for death—nay, he admired their intolerant pride of character and strict observance of religion; while he smiled to note the utter freedom which abroad, at least, they affected, from the female yoke. He thought of settling in Turkey, and so thinking, watched those white sea-birds that flit to and fro across the surface of the Bosphorus, never resting wing nor dipping plumage in the fair cool wave, and wondered whether he too was doomed to be a homeless wanderer in the world for evermore!

The leaven was working in him, you see, all this time. It drove him into action, and in action he found the anodyne which he was fain to accept for rest.

About this period, a little cloud like that in Holy Writ, “no bigger than a man’s hand,” appeared in Syria, above the chapel-roof that covers in the most sacred spot on earth. By-and-by it had spread over the whole heavens from east to west, and the Cossacks were gathering in the Ukraine, and the Royal Irish recruiting in Galway, and Omar Pasha was watching his overwhelming enemy on the Danube, with an army of brave men, half-starved, half-equipped, and wretchedly officered, save for a handful of adventurous Englishmen who had volunteered their services in the cause of the Sultan.

The Turkish General was sitting quietly on his horse, a little out of the line of fire from a Russian field-work, against which it was his intention to advance. Omar Pasha could feed an army, could manœuvre an army, and could fight an army. Moreover, he was gifted with that *coup d’œil* which distinguishes at once between the apparent and the real key to a position. He was muttering a few phrases of discontent in German, for it was already daylight, and a new redoubt, skilfully engineered, had sprung up in the night. The Russians must have laboured hard, and without intermission, for,

though the work was low, it was carefully sloped and finished off, while the few guns it mounted commanded every approach to the chief earth-work it was constructed to protect.

"We *must* have it, Excellency!" exclaimed an English officer of Engineers, with a determined look on his comely red-bearded face. "It's well for *us*," he added, shutting his glasses, and pulling his horse's head up from the wet morning herbage, "that they could not put it fifty paces further back. I can get a battalion along that ravine tolerably under cover till within pistol-shot. We must storm it then, and carry it with the bayonet!"

"Who is to lead them?" asked the General, mistrusting sadly an unwieldy Pasha for so dashing a business.

"Oh! Major Brooke will lead them, of course," answered the other. "It's just in his line. Excellency, we will have it in a quarter of an hour." No more was said, but in ten minutes' time, a battalion of blue coats and red fez-caps was seen to disappear in a wooded hollow, under the command of an officer, strangely attired in high riding-boots, a plaid shooting-coat, and a low round hat, with a white cloth round it, carrying a sword by



his side, and a formidable walking stick in his hand. Whilst they seemed to be swallowed in the earth, a heavy well-sustained fire opened over the General's head against the principal defence, and presently the blue coats and red caps emerged from the ravine in tolerable order, formed, wavered, hesitated, and finally disappeared again, leaving a figure, in riding-boots and plaid coat, wildly shouting, threatening and gesticulating on the bank.

The Engineer officer laughed, swore, and then laughed again. Omar Pasha shook his head, with a grim, sarcastic smile.

“It is a gallant Englander,” he observed quietly, after a few moments of suspense, during which the figure descended, and re-appeared from the ravine, with some two or three score of bolder followers, whom it was urging on by much vigorous persuasion, and a few blows from the stick. Then, whirling that weapon round its head, it made a dash, apparently by itself, against the redoubt. But the spark had kindled now, the savage Turkish spirit flashed out, and caught like wild-fire. They swarmed like wasps from the ravine—they dashed, pell-mell against the earth-work; there was a loose, irregu-

lar volley, a wild, heart-stirring cheer, and when the cheer died out, and the smoke drifted heavily away, the crimson flag, with its glittering crescent, was waving from the parapet, and the slope beneath the outwork was dotted with blue prostrate figures, and white up-turned faces, gleaming strange and ghastly in the morning sun.

“Well done, Brooke!” said the Engineer to himself, as he cantered off to hasten some poor bullocks bringing a gun up from the rear. “These guardsmen turn out some d——d good officers! though where they learn their duty is more than I can tell;” and he shook his head gravely, as a man who concedes unwillingly a self-evident proposition. How Major Brooke’s distinguished conduct affected the result of the action has nothing to do with my story, but when the Engineer asked him subsequently by what process he had acquired a knowledge of his profession in London, Brooke only laughed, and told him how the Great Duke himself had testified to the difficulty of getting thirty thousand men into or out of Hyde Park.

Peace came within six months after the fall of the Russian stronghold, and Colonel Brooke (he was a Colonel in the Turkish service now), thought

of crossing into Asia, and visiting China by way of Tartary and Thibet—thought of emigrating to Australia—thought of tracing the Nile to its source—thought of exploring Central Africa, and—found himself in Paris. Here he was rather a lion, notwithstanding that lions were plenty for a little while; but he soon got tired of it—soon began to find that city of glitter and whitewash, and perpetual motion and continual out-of-doors full-dress, and eternal drumming, dancing, dining and standing about—was a waste, too, more dreary than a Mexican plateau, more toilsome than a rocky spur of Mount Atlas.

The French ladies wondered at him hugely. It was strange to find a man so cold, yet so self-possessed. Nothing shy, nothing awkward, nothing of the “*type Anglais*” about him in speech or manner; pleasant, courteous, with a good deal of their own keen sense of humour, their tendency to sarcasm and repartee, but in all matters bordering on romance, or even flirtation, a stone, an impenetrable stone.

“*C'est un ours vois tu, Clothilde?*” said a pretty *Marquise*, summing him up in confidence to a friend, whom she suspected of designs on this man

of marble. "*Un ours instruit, bien-entendu. Un ours qui a voyagé même, et qui fait toilette. Enfin, un ours qui ne danse pas, mais qui fait danser son monde !*"

He had got sadly tired of Paris ere another recreation was provided for him in the last spot on earth at which an eruption was anticipated, in the country where England had been walking securely over a volcano for years, and started to find it burst forth over a score of kingdoms in a night. He saw an account of the Indian outbreak in an English paper, sitting over his *absinthe*, at three o'clock, in the rue Rivoli. By ten, next morning, he was at London Bridge ; by seven that night, he was leaving this station in the train for Calcutta direct, with his appointment and a pair of improved saddle-bags.

He was with Sir Colin at Lucknow, and reached Windham in time to take his part in the hard-fought defence of Cawnpore. Then came a severe wound, a raging, wasting fever, and he was down for weeks and weeks, feeble, prostrate, delirious, in that blighting atmosphere, and under that burning sun.

Archie Brooke rose, like many others, from a

bed of suffering, having found out certain truths that do not strike men so keenly in the saddle or the trenches, as on the stretcher of a hospital. He was a calmer, happier man after that weary period. The impatience, the restlessness, the craving for incessant action were gone, and only the quiet energy, and cool good-humoured courage, which were a part of his very nature, remained. He had discovered, that for happiness, duty was a better substitute than excitement. Wherever he could be of service, he went; wherever he went, he worked harder, more quietly, more unselfishly, than other people.

Time, or rather Mercy, had healed the great wound now—the great wound that had been first dealt by a beloved hand, and then torn open once again by the relentless gripe of death. Twice had the pain been keener than he could bear; now there was left a dull, aching sense of void, but sorrow had given place to resignation—resignation was about to blossom into Hope. Not the hope that is dependent on earthly uncertainties, and scarce deserves the name, but the sure and certain hope that already grasps confidently at the other world. He could have borne to go to

England now. He caught himself often thinking of the cool English breezes, and the smiling English valleys, and the white-thorn on the hedges, nay, the very butter-cups in the May meadows, rich with green and gold. He longed to be at home just once again, were it only to see the grass waving tall and fresh over a beloved grave.

He was employed in the pacification of the Lebanon, a duty for which his familiarity with French arrangements and Eastern intrigue especially fitted him; and when that complicated business was concluded, came back after his long absence, to be knighted by his Sovereign. If, on his previous return to London, he had been surprised to find how few people recognised him, he might have been gratified now, at his first levée, with the curiosity evinced concerning the quiet, dark, war-worn man, with all those foreign orders on his breast, and amused at the answers of old schoolfellows at Eton, and companions afterwards in the world, who had quite forgotten him, and could not tell who he was. After he had seen his brother's children, and especially Helen, Sir Archibald completely abandoned an idea he had once

formed of taking service with his old employer, the Sultan, and remaining entirely abroad. The girl seemed to have found her way at once to her soldier-uncle's heart. She wondered indeed at the deep tenderness with which he would fix his eyes on her face, and why there should be a moisture in them sometimes, that was almost like tears; but with the instinct of her sex, Miss Brooke soon found out that her word was law with Uncle Archie, and she petted him, and appealed to him, and domineered over him, and ordered him about accordingly.

When Helen “came out,” it was Sir Archibald who arranged her presentation by the great Lady Waywarden herself; and I believe he bespoke (and paid for) the beautiful dress which she wore, of which, as of her chaperon's, was there not an account, sublime and incomprehensible, in the *Morning Post*? When his niece rode in the Park, as ride she would, under a broiling sun, in the hottest part of the day; it was her uncle whom she commanded to take care of her, and whose horsemanship she was good enough to commend, for the Brookes, like many of our English families, were centaurs from the cradle; whom she paraded

up and down at all places, untiring ; and scolded if he ventured to complain of the heat.

“ You, dear, of all people ! Who have been in Africa and India. Absurd ! Why, Uncle Archie, I call it *de—lightful* ! ”

The girl was immensely proud of him, quoting him, and adopting his opinions on most subjects with a facility truly feminine ; and the pair had all sorts of private jokes and understandings between themselves, as indeed was to be expected, for in London they were inseparable : and if she wanted to be taken anywhere in the country, Sir Archibald would throw over every engagement, and come down at a moment’s notice, to attend on his niece.

He lived in London now, very quietly and unostentatiously, therefore people believed him to be immensely rich, and consequently, horribly stingy. That he was neither the one nor the other could have been substantiated by his banker, and a great many very poor people, in some of the most squalid rookeries of the town. Society, with its usual discrimination, wondered what he would do with his money, and why he did not marry !

It seems that a bachelor is never safe, not even



a bachelor with white moustaches and thirty years' campaigning over his head. There are, therefore, women to be found, I presume, who spare neither age nor grey hairs. How are we to distinguish them? Do they go about disguised like the others at dinner and evening parties, cool, shining, beautiful, and well dressed? I often marvel at the men to whom these goddesses stoop so kindly; often try hard, and fail, to see what it is in Endymion, coarse, ill-mannered, awkward, and perhaps irritable, that draws Diana down from the lustrous regions where she reigns amongst her nymphs. Is it an attractive force on his part, or a spontaneous effort on hers? Is it a merciful pity for our sex, or a cordial dislike of her own?

Even at Sir Archibald's age it is not always a waste of time to make love to an elderly gentleman; but after a career like his, an honest stand-up battle with self, fought fairly out, and hardly won at last, it is like watering a sand-bank in hopes of raising a crop. The labour is indeed absorbed quietly, gratefully, and to any extent, but there is no result from it whatever.

The *marquise* was right about Sir Archibald after all. For women he was a bear with good

manners; but a bear who had never broken his chain. There was yet a link or two left that the poor bear could not have found in his heart to part with. Other bears keep whole sets of rusty fetters hidden away in their dens—lockets, rings, gloves, flowers, efforts of embroidery, packets of faded yellow letters tied about with dingy ribbons once so bright and new. Other bears even like sometimes to dwell upon their servitude, to talk of their capture, their teachers, their resistance, and the red-hot foot-hold on which they learned their steps. But this bear kept all such matters for his own reflection; and though he hugged the chain-links close to his bearish heart, they were very simple, harmless, and could have compromised nobody. They did but consist of a lock of hair, soft and dark like Helen's, in an envelope—no letter, nothing more, except that on the turned-down leaf of the envelope was written in a woman's hand—

“You will forgive me, I know. But I shall never forgive myself.”

And now Uncle Archie had come joyously down to Bridlemere on purpose to take Helen to the Middlesworth ball.



## CHAPTER X.

### THE MIDDLESWORTH BALL.



THIS was no trifling ceremony, no common-place, ordinary function. To the inhabitants of Middlesworth it partook of the nature of a sacrifice, entailing, as it did, vast preparation, anxiety, and expense. To the surrounding county families, although intrinsically a festivity, it was also an important epoch from which to date all other less engrossing events. As people say before and after Christmas, so those who attended it were accustomed to date their proceedings as before and after the Middlesworth ball. It was a moveable feast, too, and depended, in a certain sense, and by courtesy, as it were, on the moon. She seldom smiled upon

it, however, usually hiding herself the whole of the important night behind heavy clouds coming up from the south-west, with a drizzling rain.

Post-horses were in great request at this season, and their drivers expectant of large gratuities in virtue of the occasion, with the very questionable state of sobriety it produced: nor were carriage accidents and heart-breaking stoppages, both going and returning, by any means unusual incidents in the gathering. People abused it also, and never seemed sure they would go, though they always went. Papas said it interfered with hunting, which was simply untrue, for men cannot ride across country at night, and everybody can get up to *hunt*, however late he goes to bed, as ladies very well know. Mammās thought they would catch cold, which was indeed a more plausible excuse, and borne out by subsequent indisposition; whilst the young ladies vowed it would be stupid, and they didn't care the least whether they were taken or not, having got their dresses ready all the time.

There seemed also a general anxiety to arrive as late as possible. How the Town Hall, which

was a large room, ever filled, under this prevailing feeling, was probably known but to Tootle and Dinne, the celebrated musical firm, who, from their gallery overhead, dominated the ball, hatching, nursing, tempering, and keeping it alive by their strains. They could have told you, and they alone, how large and stately and empty the apartment looked when they first took their places, and the second fiddle commenced his exeruciating practices for the attainment of harmony!—how beautifully the walls were decorated with stripes of clintz and festoons of flowers!—how wondrous was the execution of the Town Arms in chalk upon the floor!—how mellow the lustre of those wax-lights under which sallow women looked fair, and fair women lovely!—lastly, how the first arrivals kept cautiously in the doorway, shrinking from this enchanted region like a knot of bathing schoolboys hesitating on a river-brink in June!

They could have told you, better than I can—for they must have watched her oftener—how Mrs. George Stoney was usually amongst the earliest; how imperially she entered, spreading her robes of stiff and costly material about her, as

she took up a position of defence, at what she was pleased to term "her own end of the room;" how her husband followed humbly, looking and feeling completely out of place, as a man must on such occasions, whose gloves are too large, whose boots too small, and whose general habits and disposition lead him to wish earnestly that he was in bed; how they were seldom accompanied, though generally followed at a later period, by Philip—far more in his element, and, for reasons of his own, regarding these gaieties as glimpses into Paradise; how, by degrees, more groups of beauty and muslin, and *tulle* and jewellery, arriving, more voices repeating the same *formula*—"What a night! Where are you staying? Whom did you bring?" and, "What a pity the room is so narrow!" the separate knots congregated into a crowd, and then dispersed suddenly in couples, while the band struck up, the centre of the apartment cleared itself as if by magic, the *vis-à-vis* were bespoken, the quadrilles arranged, and the ball fairly began.

The weather was cold, though not cold enough to stop hunting. Two or three adjoining packs of hounds had shown sport; the dancing men,

exhilarated by their morning's amusement, were on the alert; the chaperons, congregating round the fire, already prophesied a good ball; nay, Mrs. Stoney herself whispered to George that the "stuck-up set seemed less stuck-up than usual, though, to be sure, Lady Waywarden hadn't come yet;" and everything looked promising for a success.

Philip was embarked in the intricacies of "The Lancers" with a pretty, blue-eyed girl, who, in the short intervals permitted by that complicated dance, looked up at him from under her eyelashes, as some girls always do look up at their partners, with the benevolent object, no doubt, of making the whole thing as pleasant as possible. She could not but observe that his attention wandered visibly towards the door, "watching for Lady Waywarden's party, of course," thought the blue-eyed girl, and she cursed them by her gods. What I mean is, she said "*Bother!*" in her heart. Then the measure came to a close; he mollified her with tea; he returned her to her mother, and stood under the music free as air again, but still watching the door.

Just after the next dance (a glorious waltz,

played a little too slow), a buzz of attention, almost of admiration, quivered through the room. Philip's heart jumped into his mouth, and sank down to his boots again. It was but Lady Waywarden's party after all ! The rest of the society, however, seemed to appreciate this addition to their ranks more favourably, although, to Mrs. Stoney's delight, her ladyship did not appear. She had dressed, indeed, for it, and sent her party from Tollesdale, but changed her own mind at the last moment. "The weather was hateful. It was a dark drive. The Duchess could chaperon Julia. Waywarden would take care of them all. She didn't want to catch cold ; and so good-night to you, dears, and a pleasant ball !"

Therefore, my lord came in with the Duchess of Merthyr-Tydvil by his side, and a frank, free, good-humoured, pleasant duchess she was ! Fine face, Saxon to the chin, soft, kind eyes, a rosy mouth, a ringing laugh, a French dressmaker, handsome, happy, and twenty-three ! No wonder she was popular, no wonder the grandees crowded about her, and overwhelmed her with questions, and welcomes, and civilities, and congratulations



on her looks, her dress, her dancing, everything that was hers!

“Where was the Duke?” “Oh! Merthyr-Tydvil never turned up! He was hunting his hounds the other side of the county. Very likely fighting his way at this moment, poor fellow! on a tired horse, to Tollesdale. Very likely fast asleep in his own arm-chair at St. Barbs. So sorry he wasn’t here! Had waited till the last moment in hopes he’d come. Merthyr-Tydvil was wild about dancing, and this seemed to be such a nice ball!” And the Duchess, who, though she *was* a duchess, had married for love, and was as happy as a dairymaid, looked about so pleased, so pleasing, so kindly, fresh, and radiant, that even Tootle and Dinne above fancied a dozen more wax candles had been suddenly lighted, and struck up an enlivening measure with a keener taste and spirit than was usually displayed by those celebrated performers themselves. Nay, Mrs. George Stoney could not resist the pervading influence, and was actually fascinated by the Duchess. The latter had no idea of confining her good spirits and her good-humour to any one part of the room. She asked her jovial host point-

blank to dance with her. She made Waywarden take her to the low end, and invite that great handsome woman to be their *vis-à-vis*, owning, I am afraid, that she wanted to inspect so wonderful a dress more closely: nay, she trod upon the dress by accident, and apologized so sweetly, and spoke to Mrs. George subsequently in the tea-room so kindly, that the latter adored her on the spot, and was never afterwards tired of praising her favourite, paying her, as she thought, the greatest of all compliments, while she protested "she could not conceive it possible how such a sweet creature as that could be a friend of Lady Waywarden!"

And these victories her grace effected without effort or afterthought, just as she transfixed Ragman de Rolle by a glance, literally dazzling that diffident hussar with her beauty, leaving him bewildered, awe-stricken, and positively gasping with admiration.

Philip Stoney had left off watching the door for, perhaps, five minutes, during which interval he had been pressed for a tea-drinking service by an old lady who had held him on her knee when a child. The little start he gave, and the rapidity

with which the colour left his cheek, when he saw Sir Archibald and Miss Brooke at his very elbow, as he re-entered the ball-room, sufficiently accounted for his previous vigilance to any one who happened to be watching him. Mrs. George did, and, being a woman, found him out from that moment.

Helen looked remarkably well; but she, too, was pale even for *her*. Nevertheless, as both her brothers remarked (for both were there), "everything had been done to bring her out in good form:" nor, indeed, could the most artful and experienced of dowagers in London have been more anxious than was Sir Archibald about the dress and appearance of his charge. It was this old soldier, whose life had been spent in camps and deserts, and long, weary campaigns, and fierce irregular warfare, who had suggested the dressing after dinner, the cup of strong coffee before starting, and the latest departure possible, that she might appear with smooth hair and fresh toilet when the room was at its fullest.

How proud he was of her as she moved gracefully along, with her white wreath encircling the dainty head that she carried like a young stag, in

happy contrast with its wealth of silken jet black hair. Even Walter could not help whispering to Jack: "I must say, Nell always looks like a thorough-bred one;" and Jack replied from the bottom of his honest heart, "Darling Nell!" but Sir Archibald believed in her as the handsomest girl and the nicest that had been seen in England for twenty years, and doted on her and admired her more than did anybody else on earth, except one, who had been watching the door so eagerly to-night. That one could have kissed the very ground she trod on. *He* worshipped her as an angel, while Sir Archibald loved her as a child. To her uncle she was the embodiment of memory—to *him*, of hope.

Mr. Philip Stoney, I say, started when he saw her, as if he had not expected Miss Brooke, which seems strange, inasmuch as if this had been the case, I cannot satisfactorily account for his presence here at all.

I think I can understand also, though I cannot explain, why he made as though he had not noticed her, but collected his energies a little, and then walked up to perform his bow, rather distantly, doubting the while that he should hardly yet find

courage to ask her to dance. But Helen looked so pleased to see him, and shook hands with him so cordially, that he brightened up all at once, and made his very natural proposal with far more audacity than he could have hoped, but in a low tone and a serious, notwithstanding, since it was no light boon to *him* for which he begged. I dare say Miss Brooke's quick ear did not fail to detect a little tremor in his voice, and she may even have suspected the reason why the strong arm fairly trembled under a hand that rested on it so lightly.

If so, it might have been displeasure, perhaps, which caused her to speak but little, and on common-place topics, scarce louder than a whisper, and that prevented her lifting her own eyes more than once, and then very cautiously, to her partner's; nay, though her colour went and came, this is often the result of hatred as well as love. I know she looked Mr. Multiple straight enough in the face when she recognised the stranger whom she had seen in her afternoon's walk, and who presumed to bow to her on the strength of that fortuitous meeting. I also think she clung to Philip a little as she hurried away, leaving Sir

Archibald and No. 6 standing together near the door, from which position they reconnoitred, and remarked upon the different incidents that constituted the ball.

And now Ragman de Rolle, stimulated by the threefold influence of ambition, admiration, and champagne, implored Sir Archibald, whose acquaintance he had made through Walter, to present him to the young, happy, handsome Duchess. Uncle Archie, who knew everybody, and, if a little satirical, was always good-natured, complied immediately, and "Rags," emboldened by success, ventured to ask her to dance, trembling the while at his own audacity.

She was one of those straightforward, energetic ladies, who go to a ball for the express purpose of dancing, just as a sportsman beats a turnip-field to kill as many birds as he can. The more sport she had, the better she was pleased. I believe also, to use another metaphor of the same nature, she cared little about a partner's points, so long as he could "go."

"Very happy, I'm sure," said the Duchess, with a cordial bow and a radiant smile that would have knocked even an experienced practitioner

out of time, while she drew her arm through her partner's, and led him away at once in search of a *vis-à-vis*, for this was to be a quadrille, and she worked her dances regularly through, round and square.

The hussar scarcely knew whether he was on his head or his heels. He had a vague idea he was dreaming; the whole thing was too like enchantment to be true; but if ever man resolved to merit his good fortune, by rigid attention to a figure, and accurate execution of its steps, that man was "Rags."

Though Mr. Multiple moved about the room, criticising freely its inmates, Uncle Archie, be sure, did not stir from his position near the door, for he had told Helen she would find him there when required; but he watched the dancers with the indolent enjoyment of a man who has begun to rest himself in life. Even Sir Archibald was somewhat given to dreaming—a habit he had acquired in many still night-watches, and lonely wanderings. He had read a little, and thought much. His reading had been quaint, desultory, and somewhat useless; his thoughts were imbued with a tinge of romance and melancholy, and

humour combined, which afforded him a good deal of quiet amusement. From where he stood he could see nothing of Helen but the ample skirt of her garment, so he watched the Duchess, and admired her fresh English beauty, her frankness, her comeliness, her fair modest brow, her native dignity of manner, and the robe of truth and innocence, and simple high-born grace in which she moved so royally. He thought of her noble, free-hearted young husband, whom she loved so fondly, and the brave old race to which she had brought the blood and beauty of her own. The brave old race that had given its scions so lavishly for England, wherever shot was fired or sword drawn, or life poured out like water in the cause of honour, and the knightly craving for renown; that had seen its children stand at Inkerman, and charge at Waterloo, and walk gracefully to death at Malplaquet, and shiver lances on the mail-clad chivalry of France, to the battle-cry of "St. George!" at Crécy and Poitiers; that traced its lineage upward, loyal and stainless, to the Saxon Heptarchy; to the good King Alfred, even to the dim, distant glories of Arthur and his Round Table, with the princely



paladins, amongst whom one of the knightliest and the noblest was its own ancestor, "Sir Carodac the Keen."\*

Still looking at the Duchess as she moved through the dance, he thought of "The Boy and the Mantle;" of the first gentle heart on record that had given itself to a Craddock; of its faith, its loyalty, its honest, unshrinking confidence in its own truth and purity, when it assumed the enchanted garment that none could wear if false, however beautiful, as described in the simple stanzas of that quaint old ballad:

"When shee had tane the mantle  
And east it her abowt,  
Upp att her great toe  
It began to crinkle and erowt.  
Shee said, Bowe downe, mantle,  
And shame me not for nought.

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\* "Why should I mention many more—  
Sir Kaye, Sir Banier, and Sir Bore,  
Sir Carodac the Keen;  
The gentle Gawain's courteous lore,  
Hector de Mares and Pellinore,  
And Launcelot, who evermore  
Looked stolen wise on the Queen?"

*Bridal of Triermain.*

Once I did amisse,  
I tell you certainlye,  
When I kis't Craddocke's mouth  
Under a greene tree—  
When I kissed Craddocke's mouth  
Before he marryed mee."

A strange, old-world ballad! Strange thoughts for a ball-room! Sir Archibald had almost forgotten where he was, when a voice that never failed to fix his attention, roused him from his dream, and Helen murmured in the fond, petulant tone that she used only to *him*:

"Oh, Uncle Archie, I've promised to dance the next dance with that horrid man, and it's a waltz!"

"That horrid man" was no other than Mr. Multiple, who, considering his previous meeting with Miss Brooke, and acquaintance with her uncle and second brother (for Walter knew him, of course), entitled him to make the request, had offered himself as a partner, and whom Helen, too young a lady to be rude, was forced to accept, though much against the grain.

She gave a comical little look of resignation at her uncle when Mr. Multiple came to claim her, and darted one glance, which was immediately

withdrawn, at another face far down the room. Then the waltz began, and there was nothing for it but to rest her hand upon Mr. Multiple's shoulder, and put off into the whirlpool under his pilotage.

Had Sir Archibald not been so taken up with his favourite as to have eyes for none but her, he must have remarked a charming couple, in whom he was to a certain degree interested, floating airily round to the sinking, swelling strains of the soft *Nachtwändler* waltz. Lady Julia Treadwell was one of those damsels who can never be thoroughly eclipsed. Less splendid than the Duchess, less lovely than Helen Brooke, she was, if possible, better dressed than either, and triumphed, besides, in a brightness and piquancy peculiarly her own. She danced, too, like a sprite, or a Frenchwoman, and never seemed hot or out of breath, whereas the Duchess, in the ardour of her exercise, did pant a little more than was correct, and flush a little more than was becoming. She had the knack, too, of talking to her partner the whole time, on indifferent subjects, tinged with a strong dash of sarcasm. She seemed to many lookers-on, of whom Jack Brooke

was one, to be discussing some engrossing topic in keeping with the general fascination of the scene. What she *did* say was simple and practical enough. You must imagine the partners whirling by, smooth and speedy as an express train, the lady going with perfect ease, and, as she observed, "quite within herself."

Lady Julia—

"Good waltz that old one, Mr. Brooke. They don't half put the pace in, though!"

Walter, who, though an excellent dancer, was doing all he knew—

"I can make it a little faster, if you like."

Lady Julia, looking about her as coolly as if she were standing still—

"Wait till that red woman collapses, and we'll get the steam on. Down the whole length of the room, like the run-in for the Derby.—Ah! I *like* this!"

So down the whole length of the room they came with the utmost haste, for the "red woman," who was, indeed, no other than Mrs. George Stoney, *collapsed* from sheer exhaustion, after a round or two, and Lady Julia, having a clear stage, took advantage of it to whirl along with a

dexterous rapidity that elicited this exclamation of enjoyment when she stopped, which she did immediately under Jack Brooke's nose.

He made her a solemn bow, as politeness required, and she returned it with a little, saucy nod, half malicious, half defiant, that frightened honest Jack considerably. Then she bent towards her partner, and asked him where he learned to waltz. "You can go fast without labouring," said she. "Is it natural genius or polite education? You must have begun very early. Did the *deux-temps*, in a pinafore, with your sister, I should say?"

Walter "didn't know, he was sure. Always waltzed; ever since he could remember. Supposed he must have learnt once. Taught it by his wet-nurse, in all probability!"

"Don't your brother waltz?" asked Lady Julia, quickly; and, turning sharp round upon Jack, repeated her question: "Don't *you* waltz, Mr. Brooke?"

But before he could answer, which he must have done in the negative, she was away on her flight once more, her pliant figure swaying gracefully to every movement of her cavalier, her draperies floating about her in a mist of lace and muslin,

and a gossamer material which, I understand, is called, with great propriety, "*illusion*," her eyes shooting sparks like diamonds, and the uncompromising mouth shut tighter than before. She looked like a very resolute Ariel, bound on some mission not exclusively of charity or goodwill.

Jack watched her for two or three rounds of the room with much the same expression that a child wears staring at a soap-bubble. He was wishing, perhaps, that he could waltz as well as Walter; was thinking that he had spent too much time in the study of equitation, self-defence, boat-racing, and professional bowling, to the neglect of those lighter accomplishments which are patronized by the female sex. What did *they* care—what did *she* care for the exact feather of an oar, the scientific defence of a wicket, the "cross-counter" that staggered a prizefighter, or the "set to" that landed a steeplechase? Like Sir Andrew Aguecheek, he regretted that he had not devoted to "the tongues," and such polite acquirements, the hours he had wasted in these rude, robust pursuits.

He watched Lady Julia, I say, as a child watches a soap-bubble, and on his honest countenance came

the blank look of the child when the soap-bubble bursts, while he turned away, and walked drearily off to the supper-room to refresh himself with a draught of the "Plantagenet Arms" champagne.

Physically speaking, this was by no means a wise measure—that beverage, like a good deal of ball-supper champagne, being of a kind which inflicts headache more or less acute, and a hot sensation at the back of the drinker's throat next morning. Nevertheless, he found Rags here, in a state of high triumph and jubilation, tossing off the pernicious mixture in frothy bumpers, and holding Philip Stoney by his button-hole the while, in ignorance or defiance of that gentleman's obvious anxiety to escape.

Rags was pleased with himself, and consequently pleased with everything else, even the "Plantagenet Arms" champagne. He had made, as he felt, a bold plunge into high life. Henceforth, Rags believed, he was what French people call *luncé*. He had not tried the great world yet. He began to think he should like it. With a few hints from Walter Brooke, he did not see why he should get on worse than other people. This was a famous start. He should not dance again; of course not.

After the Duchess, every other partner would be tame and insipid. Not that he meant to cultivate her grace's acquaintance any more that night. Though delightful, the process had entailed a high state of nervous tension. He had done enough, he thought, for once, and had earned the right to enjoy himself. So Rags leaned across the suppertable, and held his champagne-glass to be filled again and again.

"Have some more, Brooke," said he, as Jack set his goblet down, with no great approval of its contents. "And you too, Stoney. Why you've had none yet, man! You, sir, here! Three clean glasses and a fresh bottle of champagne! Good ball, Brooke. Capital ball! By Jove, sir, the thing's been remarkably well done to-night. I never saw a better-looking lot of women in a room, and some of the London ones too, as I was telling Stoney, just now. There's the Duchess of Merthyr-Tydvil—your uncle introduced me. Isn't she just a ripper! I say, I've been dancing with her!"

Jack cheerfully conceded that the Duchess was "a ripper," not attaching, perhaps, to that epithet the full sense of sublimity in which it was used,



as I have my doubts whether he considered her quite the handsomest person in the room, and Rags, filling for himself and his friends, proceeded with great earnestness—

“Lady Julia’s not what I call an every-day one; is she, Brooke? Can’t she just dance? And such an easy goer, too, with it all. I say, old boy, your brother Walter seems making the pace pretty good there, eh? Walter don’t often come out like this! I never saw him so fit as he is to-night. He’s a brother-officer of mine, you know—Walter—and the greatest friend I have. There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for Walter. Here’s his good health!”

Perhaps Jack may have thought that it would be no uncongenial task to “make running” in so pleasant a race, and that a man deserved but little credit for being “fit,” as Rags called it (by which term this gentleman understood the most advantageous state possible both of mind and body), whilst speeding through the enchanted maze, with that wicked Ariel, whom mortals and the Peerage called, by courtesy, Lady Julia Treadwell; but Jack was a man of few words at any time, and little inclined to be loquacious now,

so he contented himself with a sigh and another mouthful of the execrable champagne.

Philip Stoney was silently watching the dancers through the door of the supper-room.

Rags proceeded with his reflections on things in general, and women in particular—

“I haven’t forgotten your sister, Brooke; though you can’t well tell a fellow how deucedly you admire his sister to his face! She looks like a queen; that’s what *she* does. And dresses like one, too. Devilish odd if Walter Brooke’s sister didn’t dress well. You know she’s Walter’s sister as well as yours, old boy! I say, Brooke, you must introduce me to your sister. Not to-night, though. Hang it! I shan’t go near the dancers any more to-night. I’ve had *my* fun, you know, and a skinful of this stuff, and now I shall smoke a quiet weed, you know, before turning in. Will you have a quiet weed, Brooke? I can give you a very good one. Halloa! Here she comes, dancing with the chap that’s staying in the hotel. Don’t like that chap. Don’t know him, but don’t like him! Where does he hang out? Who the devil is he?”

Though Rags was somewhat voluble, having his

tongue loosened by the stimulants he had applied, there was yet a certain perceptive faculty glimmering through the fumes of champagne which enabled him to observe annoyance and something like anger in Miss Brooke's countenance as she entered the supper-room, now nearly deserted, on Mr. Multiple's arm. He was whispering to her earnestly, and with a smile that did not improve his beauty. Her head was erect, and held as far from his as the situation permitted. It was obvious she did not like her company; and catching sight of her brother Jack, she made a movement towards him at once, releasing her partner's arm, with a cold, disdainful bow that denoted displeasure and dismissal.

Unfortunately, at this moment, Rags, whose legs were more affected by his potations than his head, and who, while he retained his sense of propriety, had great difficulty in preserving his perpendicular, made such a lurch from the table that had it not been for Jack's assistance he must have fallen, then and there. Such a lurch, indeed, as only needed his further explanation of its cause—namely, that he had caught the spurs, which, being out of uniform, he did *not* wear—to indicate

that Rags had better be got to bed as soon as convenient. Jack good-naturedly helped him out by a side-door, covering his retreat with his own broad shoulders, and saw him safe into a fly that could be trusted to take him home to barracks. <sup>2</sup>

There were but three people left in the supper-room. Helen, standing alone, blushing painfully with embarrassment and annoyance; Mr. Multiple stepping forward to resume his attentions, and Philip Stoney, with his lip twitching, and the eager look on his face that it used to wear when he kept the wickets for Middlesworth in their great matches against Mudbury.

He had tact enough, though, for a whole Eleven, and that is a quality, I think, which is more successful with women than either courage or intellect, though, perhaps, it seldom exists without a leavening of both.

"This is *our* quadrille, I think, Miss Brooke," said he, with as cool, matter-of-fact an air as if it had been so arranged for a fortnight, and the second figure of the dance had not already commenced. Then he walked her quietly back into the ball-room, without fuss or ceremony, thus extricating her from the false position in which

she was left by her brother's sudden departure in charge of Rags.

What a number of ways there are of saying "Thank you!" When it is murmured by a soft kind voice that is, to *your* ear, the one voice of woman upon earth; when a gentle head leans towards you, breathing fragrance in your face; when a loved hand rests on your arm heavier than it has ever rested before, and the figure that haunts you in your dreams clings closer, as if for comfort and protection; then, I think, those two little words, however low they are spoken, carry with them as much of tenderness and gratitude and appeal as it is in the power of language to convey.

Probably, Philip Stoney was of my opinion, for although it was too late to join the dancers, he did not at once conduct his charge back to Sir Archibald, who was waiting for her faithfully at his post. On the contrary, he led her into a sort of passage-room adjoining the receptacle for the ladies' cloaks, much affected at times as a resting-place and refrigerator by tired and heated damsels, but now, in consequence of a popular set of quadrilles and a waning assemblage, left unoccupied. Here Philip set a chair for the lady, with the

utmost deference ; and not before she had got her fan well at work did he venture an apology for his forwardness.

“I saw you were tired, Miss Brooke,” said he, affecting an air of unconcern, “and I thought you would like to sit down. There is not a chair in either of the other rooms. I hope,” he added, looking away from her, and obviously not knowing exactly what he said, “I hope you are rested now.”

Helen smiled. The inference was an ungallant one, and this unconscious, honest wooer was so different from Mr. Multiple.

“Not yet,” she answered kindly. “Not till I have thanked you again, Mr. Stoney, for your thoughtfulness. Indeed”—the fan was going very fast now,—“indeed, you never seem to care for any trouble or inconvenience, if it is to oblige me.”

“There is nothing I would not give, or do, or suffer, for your sake,” replied Philip, off his guard, at last. “Miss Brooke”—he continued, in a choking voice, but stopped short, for she had turned very pale, and the voice was not like hers, in which she stammered—

“No! Oh, no! I think I will go back to

Uncle Archie now, Mr. Stoney, please; but thank you all the same."

He might have been a little hurt, for he offered her his arm immediately.

"Forgive me," said he. "I have monopolized you too long. You want to join the dancers?"

"I shall not dance any more to-night," said Helen, demurely enough, as Sir Archibald thought, for the pair had almost reached him when she made this austere declaration; but I imagine there was some mysterious inflection of voice, some passing expression of countenance by which it was accompanied, that gave it an import of a consoling and exhilarating tendency, for Philip's face brightened up on the spot, and he handed her over cheerfully to Sir Archibald, wishing "Good-night" quite merrily, and disappearing in the crowd with the brisk energy of step and manner that was habitual to him.

Helen did not dance again, and it was odd enough that Philip's sister-in-law could not prevail on him, either by entreaty or ridicule, to pair off with any one of the many young ladies whom she delighted to scold, suit with partners, and generally *matronize* at the Middlesworth ball.

It *did* happen, though by a fortuitous concurrence of circumstances truly remarkable, that he was in the street at the exact moment when Helen got into her carriage, after being carefully and skillfully shawled by Uncle Archie, to the disgust of No. 6, not yet retired to that dormitory, as wishing to see the last of Miss Brooke. It *did* happen also, that she wished him "*Good night!*" again. Two very simple words—an exceedingly conventional valediction to leave a man so happy as Mr. Stoney looked when she turned away.

I do not know what he saw before him to make him walk so erect, so hopeful, so defiant. At a turn in the next street, however, he thrust his hat down on his head, buttoned his coat, and started off like a madman in the direction of the brewery.

Helen and her uncle jumbled over the rough pavement in the old family coach. She "liked her ball, uncle. Oh, yes! So much! and all the more, dear, with such a cross old chaperon!" but she was unusually silent, and did not launch forth into any of the usual feminine praises of other ladies' charms, and invectives against other ladies' dresses. Nay, when they passed the barracks, and



heard the trumpets sounding the alarm, and the men turning out by scores for fatigue-duty ; though the *alerte* roused the old soldier, Helen hardly noticed it ; and when her uncle bade her look through the carriage-window at an ominous red light wavering across the sky, anticipating the dawn, it seemed to her but a dim, confused halo, all blurred and flickering, for she saw it through a mist of tears.

END OF VOL. I.

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